

The Mustang Chronicles:

Snowbound Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

With three feet of snow blanketing the pastures - and even higher drifts near the tree line - horses could not rely on grass and clover for food. That December morning, after a two-day blizzard, Joe Duryea, his ranch hands and his daughter, Mustang, hauled bale after bale of hay out to the fields. They used pickaxes to break the layer of ice on the water troughs, and Mustang was charged with making the rounds throughout the day to ensure the ice didn't re-form.

She'd spent her winter vacation from school this way many times. Living in Montana, it was to be expected.

What wasn't expected was the sound of engines overhead.

The sun had broken through billowing clouds; snow sparkled as she rode her pinto, Heartbeat, toward the property's western edge in mid-afternoon. Bundled in her parka, a scarf covering the bottom half of her face and her red hair tucked inside an orange knit hat, she still felt the sub-zero chill creep into her bones. She loved the horses - which is how she'd earned her nickname - but she wanted to be done with this chore and get back in front of the roaring fire at home.

At the unusual noise, she reined her horse and scanned the horizon. She first guessed it might be a helicopter, which some ranchers used to locate strays. The tone was different, though, and the rhythm wasn't normal. Those engines were sputtering.

Something was very wrong.

Then, she glimpsed a white shape descending rapidly from the sky. Another few seconds, and the Cessna Citation X would be clipping off the tops of pine trees with its landing gear.

And possibly killing the horses now struggling to flee before the impending crash.

The teen had no choice. "Set it down safely!" she shouted.

Biting cold winds swirled in response to the command, creating a tornado of snow which rose and caught the aircraft gently, as if it had impacted on an overstuffed cushion. Moments later, the wheels settled in deep snow, undamaged.

Mustang felt gratified she could occasionally use the power bequeathed to her by Jack Parsons for good, instead of causing accidental disasters.

Heartbeat slogged toward the plane, his breath a cloud of steam with each step. The hatch popped open as the animal approached, and a uniformed pilot stuck his head through the opening.

"We're okay!" he called into the cabin. "I just don't see how we'll be able to get out of here..."

“How ‘bout some help?” offered Mustang.

The pilot smiled at the prospect. “You look like you might need it more than we do!” he retorted.

She dismounted and planted one insulated boot on the bottom step. “I don’t know about that. You don’t seem dressed for the weather...”

“You’ve got me there. By the way, where are we?”

“Montana, about thirty miles from Helena. Your GPS not working?”

“We had a malfunction. Everything went dead, except one engine. We got lucky, landing here, instead of in the trees.”

“Luckier than you’ll ever know,” she muttered under her breath. Thick gloves pulled a walkie-talkie from her pocket. It beeped when she activated it. “Dad?”

“Where are you, girl?” crackled through the transmitter.

“The west pasture. Did you see the plane come down?”

“I’m in the barn.”

Mustang explained to her father what had happened - minus her intervention. Her parents still didn’t know about her power. They merely assumed her extended absences and eccentric behavior were part of her naturally rebellious nature.

“We’ll need coats and boots for everyone aboard,” she continued. “Maybe they can ride in on the snowmobiles...”

“It’ll have to be horseback,” corrected Joe. “We can’t get the snowmobiles started.”

It figured.

“We’ll be there in a half-hour.”

“Right. Thanks.” Mustang glanced at the shivering pilot. “Is it warm enough in there to keep you for 30 minutes or so?”

“If we close the hatch.”

“Then, close the hatch.”

“What, you’ll stay out there?”

“Not if you invite me inside.”

The pilot waved her up the remaining steps. Within the craft, the only light shone through a line of small windows facing west. Whatever mechanical failure had occurred, it had disabled all systems.

Once the hatch sealed, the pilot opened a closet and extracted a pile of monogrammed blankets. He presented one to Mustang, then moved along the aisle of single seats to where a young woman peered at the snow.

“Miss, I suggest you wrap this around yourself, to keep warm, until the horses arrive.”

“Thank you,” came the lilting voice.

“This is...” He stopped, not knowing how to introduce the newcomer.

“Mustang Duryea,” she said.

“Miss Duryea has saved us from having to freeze to death.”

The passenger faced Mustang. “That would not be a welcome demise.”

In the dimness, Mustang could make out only vague details of the young woman’s appearance. She had dark eyes and hair, mostly covered in a blue silk veil. Her complexion was tanned deeper than most, and she wore a full-length blue silk dress, with one huge diamond ring on her right index finger.

“Miss Duryea,” the pilot stated, “this is Kanti Gandhi Dinn. She is a sophomore at the University of Portland. We were flying her to meet her family in Tampa Bay for the holidays...”

“A little off course, weren’t you?”

“We were bypassing the storm which deposited all this marvelous... snow. We hit a pocket of turbulence, and were just about ready to kiss our asses good-bye...”

“Captain!” chided Kanti.

“Apologies, Miss. There’s really no other way to phrase it, and no real explanation as to why we’re all not dead right now.”

A sly grin claimed Mustang’s lips.

“The gods have always protected me,” Kanti declared. “I believe Bapu himself keeps a watchful eye on my life.”

Mustang echoed, “Bapu?”

“My great-great-grandfather was Mahatma Gandhi, known as Bapu - father - to many.”

For a split second, Mustang wondered if she’d committed another heinous mistake. She sank onto the plush seat opposite Kanti, chest heaving. Her mind raced, reviewing everything she’d said or done that day.

“Are you all right?” Kanti asked, leaning forward.

The pilot responded, “She’s probably frozen solid, after being out there.”

“Is there any warm coffee left?” inquired Kanti.

“I’ll check.”

While the pilot ducked into the galley, Mustang eyed Kanti. “Nothing... unusual happened to you during your flight, other than the malfunction?”

“No, why?”

“It’s hard to explain. How far in advance was this trip planned?”

“More than six weeks. My parents decided to fly from Delhi to Tampa Bay on business, and arranged for me to join them...”

A relieved sigh escaped Mustang’s throat. “I can say, then, I’m happy to meet you.”

Kanti squinted at her companion.

“Tell me about Bapu.”

“I never knew him, of course, and there are others among his descendants who would deny my claim. But it is as strong as any. Bapu’s son, Harilal, may have shunned his father’s ways, and passed a dissolute life - he abandoned my great-grandmother, unwed, after learning she had become pregnant - but there is one letter he wrote acknowledging the parentage of my grandfather...”

“Wow.”

“Indeed.”

Mustang scrutinized the posh cabin furnishings. “Wasn’t the Mahatma a poor man?”

“He was not interested in matters of money, if that’s what you mean. His children and grandchildren, however, have done quite well for themselves in many instances. My father, for example, owns a leading software design company, contracted to the space industry.”

“Impressive.”

“I’m studying for a business management degree, to take my place at his side.”

“Cool.”

The pilot reappeared, carrying two steaming mugs. “The coffee was cold, Miss, but I did manage to coax enough hot water from the tap to make some cocoa.”

The two girls accepted the mugs. Mustang removed her gloves, and warmed stiff fingers on the ceramic, before taking a sip. She turned to look out the window, and saw her father and three ranch hands crest the nearby hill. They brought three empty horses, and pulled a sled of supplies.

The sun was setting by the time Mustang convinced Kanti to shed her lightweight attire for jeans, a hoodie, snow suit and boots. The captain and co-pilot were already mounted, discussing options for towing the Cessna from the field with Joe Duryea.

They moved in single file toward the ranch house, making the trip a bit faster since each horse could pass more easily through the tracks of the one ahead. Twenty minutes later, they were all thawing themselves before the fireplace, freshly-brewed coffee in hand.

Calls were made to Florida, notifying Kanti's parents of the situation. Snow storms had much of the Midwest shut down, so it would be impossible to send a plane to fetch the young woman for three days, at least. Any trains or busses which might be running would take too long; she considered herself stranded.

"You're welcome to the spare bedroom as long as you need it," Maggie Duryea offered.

The pilots would bunk with the ranch hands, and drive into Helena the next morning to make arrangements for the plane. Everyone decided to make it an early night, after so much excitement.

Mustang showed Kanti where the towels were kept, and let her have first dibs on the bathroom, to shower and change into pajamas. In better light, she noticed Kanti's petite build, and how she glided silently on tiny feet.

She also noticed the pendant hanging around Kanti's neck.

"What's that?"

"It is proof of my lineage."

"Something to do with Bapu?"

"Yes." Kanti unclasped the gold chain and passed the starburst design to Mustang. Less than an ounce of grey dust was encased in a small glass orb at the center.

"Sand from India?"

"No, the ashes of Bapu. After his death in 1948, his body was burned on a funeral pyre near the sacred Jumna River. Before the ashes were scattered, it is told Harilal managed to steal a pinch and preserve it in this necklace. My father gave it to me on my twenty-first birthday."

"Wow." Mustang briefly admired the ornate engraving on the starburst. "I've always been amazed how human beings are basically a small mound of powder. Reminds me of the instructions on drink mix packets: just add water and, poof, instant person."

Kanti was closing the bathroom door when Mustang reached in to return the pendant. She released the chain before Kanti grasped it, and the necklace fell into the bathtub, shattering.

The ashes mixed with water running from the tap; a geyser abruptly shot toward the ceiling.

A moment later, Kanti screamed.

Mustang pushed open the door and found Kanti unconscious. She thought the college student must've slipped on the tile floor. She knelt beside her and tapped her cheek.

“Kanti?”

Slowly, the dark eyes opened. She stared at Mustang in disbelief.

“Where... am I?”

Maggie appeared then, having heard the scream. “What happened?”

“She fell,” her daughter related.

“Are you hurt?” asked Maggie, stooping beside Mustang.

Kanti sat up tentatively. “I... don’t think so.” A pensive shadow drifted across her face as she tried to remember.

“Take it easy, now.” Maggie directed. “We’ll get you back to your room, so you can rest. I’ll call the doctor, and he’ll be ‘round in the morning to check on you...”

“That’s not necessary, Mrs. Duryea. It must be the unfamiliar surroundings, and the fact I’m very tired. I promise, I’ll be all right.”

Maggie rose. “If you say so. But, if you start feeling dizzy, or nauseous, let me know right away.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The older woman left the two girls to regroup. Mustang smirked. “I’m sorry for that. Mom can be a bit... over-protective sometimes.”

“My mother treats me like a little kid, too.”

“You sure you’re okay?”

“I think so. It’s just... I thought I saw...” Realization dawning, Kanti scrambled to her feet. Mustang steadied her with an arm around her slender waist.

“What is it?” the teen prompted.

Trembling fingers reached out and pulled aside the shower curtain. Standing in the bathtub, water pooled around his feet, stood a bespectacled, emaciated old man garbed in a home-spun Indian dhoti. The broken pendant was tangled around his left ankle.

Kanti nearly fainted again. “Bapu!”

Mustang grit her teeth. “Oh, hell...”

II

Holding Kanti upright, Mustang slammed the bathroom door so hard, it shook the walls. The last thing she needed was her mother returning to see the fruits of her stupidity.

It was one thing to resurrect Francis of Assisi on his native soil. Manifesting Mahatma Gandhi in her own home, given her parents’ attitudes, could wreck any future she hoped to create for herself.

A mental institution had no place in that future.

Though she felt decidedly insane at that moment, a bald, frail figure eying her, perplexed.

Kanti recovered her composure first. "Come, Bapu." She held out her hands, and her great-great-grandfather clutched them readily. He stepped gingerly from the bathtub, feet dripping. Kneeling reverently, Kanti used a large towel to pat dry his paper-thin skin.

The bathroom was too small for three people to move freely. Before Gandhi could ask the inevitable questions, Mustang held a finger to her lips.

"Give me a minute."

She cracked the door and peered down the hall. Her parents' voices carried from the living room, where they relaxed in front of the fire. Mustang signaled Kanti and Gandhi to follow her to her bedroom.

Offering the unexpected guests a seat on her mattress, the teen wedged a wooden desk chair under the doorknob. She paced to the window and back, pausing to pull the curtains. All it would take is one ranch hand to see the shadows for all hell to break loose.

Her hazel eyes darted around the room, repeatedly focusing on the open closet, in which a hidden compartment concealed Jack Parsons' journals. She cursed her illegitimate grandfather for passing along his control of the natural elements including, to her regret, life and death.

"You're here by accident, my friend," she began. Noticing Gandhi shiver, she jerked a quilt off a shelf and signaled Kanti to wrap it around him. "You're in Montana, in the United States. For disturbing your... eternal rest, I apologize."

"I always believed, if I were reincarnated, I would like to be a fish," Gandhi mused. "To return as I was, as if I'd never died..."

Glaring at Mustang, Kanti interrupted, "Bapu, this is not reincarnation. The dark magick of Kali has brought you here."

"Kali had nothing to do with it," countered Mustang. "I..."

"You are a demon in human form!" Kanti persisted.

Great, Mustang thought. Throw a hysterical college student in the mix, and I might as well call the men in the white coats myself.

She didn't have to calm Kanti, though. Gandhi took care of that. "It is all right, Ba. I am not angry, nor should you be."

"I am not Ba, Bapu. I am Kanti, great-granddaughter of your son, Harilal."

He looked wistful. "You very much resemble Katurba in the first years we were married." He turned to his hostess. "And you?"

"I'm called Mustang."

“Interesting.” He smiled. “Well, Mustang-ji, would it be possible for me to impose upon you for something to eat? I seem very hungry after... what’s happened.”

“I can fix you a bologna sandwich, if you like...”

“Oh, no, Mustang!” Kanti protested. “Bapu eats no meat.”

“Sorry. There are apples and bananas in the kitchen...”

Gandhi held his hands together in a gesture of thanks. “I would be most grateful.”

“Just promise me you won’t go anywhere.”

He nodded.

Taking a deep breath, Mustang unblocked the door. Exhaustion claimed the core of her being; she knew she couldn’t shut her eyes until she found a solution to this problem.

Maggie carried two coffee mugs into the kitchen while Mustang was filling a bowl with fruit. “What are you up to, hon?”

“Kanti wanted a snack.”

“There’s pizza in the freezer...”

“No, thanks. Fruit is healthier.”

On impulse, Mustang snatched a knife from the silverware drawer. She hadn’t gotten a good look at his teeth; maybe Gandhi needed his apple cut into slices.

Conversation between the pair in the bedroom was unintelligible to Mustang upon her return. She could have uttered a simple command for the exchange to be translated; she didn’t bother. Let them have their privacy.

Sitting at his feet, Kanti lovingly cut an apple into bite-sized pieces for her renowned ancestor. He ate with quiet dignity, and Mustang could imagine him resolutely demanding the freedom of his country from the British seventy years in the past, with the exact same bearing.

“These are delicious, Mustang-ji,” said Gandhi. “How is it you can preserve these fruits in the middle of winter?”

“Why do you call me Mustang-ji?” she replied.

Kanti provided the answer, neatly brushing together apple peels scattered on the carpet. “In our language, adding ‘ji’ to someone’s name is a sign of respect. That is why millions called my great-great-grandfather ‘Gandhiji.’”

“Well, Gandhiji, with the invention of jet engines, which travel faster than the speed of sound, fruits and vegetables can be transported from warmer climates in a matter of hours after they are picked.”

“Amazing,” he whispered.

“You would be amazed by many things, I think. Kanti can probably tell you better than I what’s transpired in your homeland...”

“You make it clear you do not approve...”

“I do not approve of building bombs intended as retaliation if neighboring countries use the bombs they have built.”

Gandhi shot a glance at Kanti. “Is this true?”

“Unfortunately, yes, Bapu,” mumbled the young woman.

“Then, my example of non-violence failed?”

“The very day you died, it was forgotten. Riots and killings in the streets of Bombay marred your funeral.”

Waving away the next slice of apple, he lowered his head into his hands. “More than once, I fasted to make my point to the nation. I will do so again now.”

“That is not possible, Gandhiji,” Mustang affirmed. “No one must know you are here.”

“Why not?”

“You’ve been dead nearly sixty years. Millions of people may half-expect Jesus to reappear any day, or think they see Elvis at the car wash, but it would be far different if you...”

“Why?”

“For one, the government would take you into custody, and scientists would run all manner of tests on you - some rather painful, I suspect.”

“I would not care.”

“Your family would be put in danger.”

He stroked Kanti’s hand. “I’m sure they would stand firm in their beliefs.”

“Others would be threatened, and forced to take drastic action.”

“Others? Who?”

“Myself.”

“I do not understand.”

“Let me give you a hypothetical example. Say the local television news station broadcast a report on your reappearance. It was seen around the world, thanks to a satellite feed. Not only would the American authorities come for you, but officials from India, and probably many other countries. Do you think I could stand by and do nothing, knowing your fate?”

“What *would* you do? You’re a child...”

“I brought you back to life. I could kill them all.”

“I would not advocate the use of guns or other weapons,” Gandhi proclaimed.

“I don’t need weapons.” Mustang didn’t want to be so blunt, but saw no alternative. “Look out the window, please.”

Kanti raised Gandhi off the bed, and they moved to the ice-encrusted glass. Holding the curtain aside, Mustang commanded, “Burn, oak tree.”

In the midst of three feet of snow, an oak tree burst into flames.

Gandhi recoiled. “*Are* you a demon?”

“No. As you said, I’m a child.”

“You use no chants, no talismans,” stammered Kanti.

“Not necessary.” She watched the tree being consumed. “Extinguish.”

A wave of snow swept up and buried the tree’s charred remnants.

Mustang yawned. “Look, let’s all get some sleep. Tomorrow, I’ll bring in my dad’s computer. We can hook up to the internet, and you can read newspapers from around the world. I swear, I’ll think of a way you can communicate your thoughts on the state of the world.”

The yawn was contagious. Both Gandhi and Kanti agreed with the teen’s plan.

“Where will you sleep?” Kanti asked her.

“I’ll stretch out on the floor in here, while Gandhiji takes the bed. My parents would get suspicious if I bunked with you or slept on the living room couch.”

“I have never slept in such luxury,” objected Gandhi.

“You deserve it, after your decades of work on behalf of your country.”

She ushered Kanti from the room, and switched off the lamp. The moon reflected off snow outside, lighting the room quite well without a bulb. “Good night.”

Hesitantly, the stooped man stretched out on the mattress. “Good night.”

As she anticipated, Mustang didn’t sleep. Long hours spent debating how to remedy this predicament were disrupted by a light knock on the door - her father. “Time to tend the horses, girl.”

“Be right there, Dad.”

Gandhi rolled over while she collected her coat, hat and gloves. “Is anything wrong?”

“No, just work to be done.”

“May I help?”

“You can help by staying here and keeping quiet.”

He lay his head on the pillow once more and dozed.

Out in the frozen pre-dawn, Mustang made the rounds of the water troughs, breaking through two inches of ice which had formed in less than twelve hours. The horses in the western pasture were restless - unusual - but not because

of the stranded aircraft. Spotlights shone on the fuselage, with a heavily bundled reporter and videographer a short distance away. The girl swore softly; one of the ranch hands must've alerted the media, and now the morning news was broadcasting live.

Nonetheless, humor could be found in the event. The pair must've parked their van on the road, and hiked the half-mile, uphill all the way...

Instead of pitching snowballs at them, Mustang finished her chore and steered Heartbeat toward home.

Practically blown through the kitchen door by a wind gust, the teen stopped short at the sight of Maggie Duryea leaning against the stove, her age-lined face a mask of confusion.

"Mom, what's wrong?"

"There's a man, in your room..."

Mustang suppressed her desire to blurt out "Oh, hell," this time. Innocently, she asked, "What did you see?"

"I was starting breakfast, when I heard your door open. I thought you might be running late for chores, so I called out to you. You didn't answer, so I went and knocked. Then, I pushed open the door and saw..." She sank on a chair at the dinette table.

"A thief?"

"I don't know. So far from town, I wouldn't put it past a tramp or burglar to take advantage of the darkness..."

"I'll go and see."

Maggie leapt up and grabbed her daughter's arm. "No! What if he has a gun, or a knife?"

"He's probably gone by now or, if not, he'll be too scared to do anything."

Slipping down the hall, Mustang made a show of opening her bedroom door. Gandhi stood in the gloom, a quilt drawn around him, staring out the window.

"No one's here, Mom," the girl called. Then, she drew upon a distant memory. "Remember the time you came out to the kitchen in the dark and thought a raccoon was sitting on the stove? How you screamed? When Dad turned on the light, you found it was just a mixing bowl with a towel thrown over it."

Her mother sighed. "I may have imagined it, after all. I was only half awake..."

The situation defused, Mustang continued into her room and closed the door. The Mahatma bowed in apology. "I needed a drink of water," he explained.

“It’s okay. Mom already thinks she’s going crazy, given what she’s seen this past year.”

“You mean, trees burning and rain falling without clouds?”

She nodded.

“Your power is an awesome gift, Mustang-ji, but you must learn to control it.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.” She switched on the light. “For now, you need some proper clothes, so you don’t freeze to death.”

Gandhi smirked at the unintentional slip. “How can one freeze to death, when one is already dead?”

Mustang stifled an embarrassed chuckle, groping in a chest of drawers for sweat pants and a flannel shirt. She presented them to the tiny figure.

“Breakfast is ready, hon!” Maggie announced, tapping on the door.

“Be right there.”

The teen signed to Gandhi to remain quiet for the next few minutes. Joining her parents at the table, she tried to appear hungry, almost choking on a bite of scrambled eggs when she heard the bathroom door open.

Kanti appeared, dressed in her silk native garb. Joe rose - the first time Mustang had even seen him behave in that fashion - and offered the college student a chair.

“Thank you, Mr. Duryea,” she accepted in her soft voice. Bypassing the American fare, she sliced an apple and genteelly took a bite.

Joe watched her, enthralled, before his wife yanked him back into the moment.

“What time are we leaving, Joe?” Maggie repeated.

“Around nine.”

“Where are you going?” inquired Mustang.

“Into town,” Maggie replied. “I’ve got grocery shopping to do, and your dad needs to swing by the feed store. You want to come along?”

“No, thanks. Kanti and I can find things to do around here.”

The news her parents would be gone for the better part of the day eased Mustang’s tension considerably. Before their return, she hoped to have figured out a way to return Gandhi to his... rightful state of non-existence.

She had other tasks to accomplish, as well. She’d promised to show her unexpected guest the state of the world, which meant using her father’s computer, conspicuously located on a battered desk in the living room. The problem of Gandhi being seen reading news dispatches on the flat-screen monitor had just been eliminated.

Kanti was drying the last plate Mustang had washed when the couple made their departure. “We should be back before dinner,” Maggie stated confidently. Not that town was a long drive, but their daughter knew they managed to find other distractions besides the grocery and feed stores during the excursion.

No compromising activities began before the Chevy Suburban disappeared past trees lining the snow-packed country road. Then, Mustang confiscated Kanti’s towel and threw it on the counter. “We can breathe now.”

“Indeed.”

Gandhi was ushered from the bedroom to the living room, where Mustang lit a fire on the grate. He might have been mistaken for any ordinary senior citizen in the oversized clothes, except for his distinctive face and penetrating eyes.

Those eyes soon closed against the words which scrolled across the computer screen. Murmurs of disappointment and anguish escaped his lips as he read of genocide in Africa, wars in the Middle East, poverty in China, oil spills, earthquakes and tsunamis, and widespread disease.

“If anything, matters have worsened since my death!” he concluded, waving Mustang to shut down the machine.

“And that’s only sixty years. Last spring, I spoke with a man who lived eight centuries ago, and he made a similar observation.”

“The human heart is weak,” remarked Kanti. “The most noble cause fails because of that fact.”

“You may be right, my child,” Gandhi said, rising stiffly. “But that is why our voices must never fall into silence.”

“Your voice has never been silent, Gandhiji,” noted Mustang. “Books about you are published and read on a regular basis, and your face and words can be seen on t-shirts and bumper stickers. Some people believe in your message, and try to live it. When nearly six billion others ignore it, however...” She glanced out the window at the falling snow. “One thing I’ve learned, with this power I have: if we can’t laugh at ourselves, life isn’t worth living. Come on.”

Gandhi hesitated. “Where?”

“To get coats and hats. It’s too beautiful a day to stay inside.”

III

Well insulated against the cold, Mustang, Kanti and Gandhi ventured outdoors into the pristine pastures. Snow sparkled when sunlight periodically

broke through the clouds, and Gandhi stood, transfixed, at the spectacle. “All the world should know such peace!” he gasped.

Mustang replied, “For a few months every year, those in the north do.” She packed a handful of snow into a ball and pitched it at Kanti.

The young woman giggled. She returned fire, and Gandhi found himself caught in the middle of a snowball barrage.

He did not participate, though. Soon, the girls discovered why. “Violence, even in fun, begets more violence,” he admonished.

“Fine,” conceded Mustang. She dropped on her back in the snow and flapped arms and legs. A minute later, she carefully climbed to her feet, leaving the impression of a snow angel behind.

Kanti squealed with delight, and imitated Mustang’s technique. Being from India, and attending school in Oregon, she’d never had much exposure to snow, so this was a brand new experience.

Gandhi approved of this innocent pastime. Completely ringed by snow angels, his two companions finally convinced him to make one of his own. Mustang secretly pondered what world leaders would think if they saw the Father of India frolicking in such an undignified manner.

Their next project was building a snowman. Not as easy as it looks in movies, the huge snow balls had to be rolled a certain way to get the proper shape. Many attempts were made, amidst gales of laughter, and the final product more closely resembled the hunchback of Notre Dame than the Frosty of story and song.

When one of the ranch hands topped the crest of the hill, Mustang thought she’d lost track of the time, and had more chores to do. Not the case, though.

“Your parents called my cell phone when there was no answer at the house,” the wiry youth related. “The Suburban hit a nasty pot hole in town, which snapped a tie rod. They’re going to have to stay overnight, until it can be fixed.”

“Thanks for letting me know.”

Her restraint evaporated when the employee retreated to the bunk house. She threw herself into the snow, rolling down the incline to the base of the hill. A triumphant shout ascended from her snow-covered form.

“Why are you so happy at your parents’ misfortune?” Gandhi puzzled, when she rejoined them.

“Don’t you see? I don’t have to worry anymore about you being seen by those who will never understand what’s happened to me.”

“Ah.”

She trudged toward the barn, Kanti and her great-great-grandfather bringing up the rear. Mounting a ladder above Heartbeat’s stall, she found the

object of her search - an old toboggan. "I haven't used this in years, but it seems to be solid." Lowering it to the pair waiting below, she leapt down, grinning. "There's a hill near the north woods, if you don't mind walking."

That was before she noticed the snowmobiles parked near the barn door. She recalled her father's mention of them not running properly, which was why they weren't being used. Still, with a word...

Mustang turned the key on the larger of the two vehicles. The engine fired immediately, running without a sputter. After tying the toboggan onto the rear with a rope, she straddled the seat, motioning Kanti and Gandhi to climb on behind her. "This way, we don't have to walk!"

Keeping the speed at 20 mph to not frighten her passengers, Mustang steered the snowmobile around the ranch, providing the pair with the "grand tour". Out near the stranded Cessna, the pilots and a team of mechanics were inspecting the landing gear and tinkering inside the cabin. Mustang veered away before they could signal for assistance.

"Do you think they'll be able to fix it?" Kanti shouted over the roar of the engine.

"Fix it, yes. Move it, no. It's three-feet deep in snow where it's sitting, and there's no runway. My guess would be they'll have to wait for the spring thaw to tow it to the road, and figure it out from there."

"Then, how will I get to Florida to meet my parents?"

Mustang debated the question. It wasn't her fault the aircraft computers had malfunctioned, and she'd taken the only reasonable action she could - saving the lives of the crew and passenger. How responsible was she for Kanti being stranded in Montana?

Better stranded than dead, she decided.

"When the weather clears, we'll think of something."

The sledding hill on the Duryea property might have rivaled tubing runs at prominent ski resorts. A quarter mile slope with a fifty degree down-angle, it was all but avoided in warmer months, because of the danger to the horses. Packed with snow, however, it was heaven.

Except for climbing back up at the end of the run.

Gandhi's ascetic lifestyle as a leader of India's non-violent revolution had never permitted him such experiences as this. Crammed together on the toboggan, the trio sped along, and he clung to Mustang with every ounce of strength, biting back fearful screams. He declined to repeat the ordeal, until the teen dragged the sled up the hill and returned to fetch him on the snowmobile.

"You'll enjoy it, now you know it's perfectly safe," she advised.

Until the toboggan flipped on the third run, and they all ended up with snow down their necks.

And laughed about it all the way home.

Mustang poked the living room fire to new life, throwing another log on the crackling embers. She brewed real hot cocoa, using milk and chocolate syrup - rather than instant mixes and water. Somehow, she'd never again view powdered drinks quite the same way.

Warming themselves by the blaze, cradling their mugs, the hostess noticed a flush to her guests' cheeks. Their smiles gave her a sense of satisfaction - maybe the accidents she caused with the power inherited from Jack Parsons wouldn't all be hopeless disasters.

Yet...

A forceful knock on the front door disrupted the quiet relaxation. A burst of snow accompanied the flight captain across the threshold when Mustang invited him inside to thaw himself.

"I won't be staying," he gushed, brushing flakes from his coat sleeves. "I just came to tell Miss Dinn the results of our investigation."

"Which are?" prodded Kanti.

"The plan is, when the weather clears, to remove the wings from the fuselage, and tow it to the Helena airport. There, it will be reassembled, and we'll be able to fly it back to Portland."

"Removing the wings will take some heavy equipment, won't it?" Mustang observed.

"Two cranes, two semis with trailers, and a tow truck, yes."

"That's going to tear up the pasture pretty badly."

"Not while the ground is frozen, which is our only hope of getting the plane out without further damage. If we wait until spring, the landing gear will sink in the mud, and it'll be far harder to move..."

"You'll have to get my father's permission to proceed," warned Mustang tersely. "He won't be back until tomorrow."

"I'll swing by in the afternoon."

The door closed and locked once more, Mustang returned to the sofa. She was no longer interested in the fire or the hot cocoa.

"What's on your mind, Mustang-ji?" Gandhi queried.

"My own shortcomings."

"Which are?"

"Impulsiveness, stupidity..."

Kanti sat beside the teen, patting her arm. “You aren’t stupid. You’ve handled what’s happened very intelligently, from what I’ve seen.”

“Stupidity caused it in the first place.”

“You are also quite logical,” Gandhi affirmed. “You will think of a way to solve this problem.”

“I can’t even think of a way to be rid of you, if you’ll excuse my bluntness.”

“You are excused. I know my presence creates difficulties for you. I am prepared to leave at any time, and live out my remaining days in peace...”

The girl’s befuddled emotions burst their dam. “But, how many remaining days would you have? Would you die again at some point, or are you immortal now? I have no way of telling.”

He recited, “Worry not about what you cannot control; act upon that which you do control.”

“Don’t you see,” she rumbled, leaning forward, “I do control it. All of it. I could make you vanish into thin air like a dematerialized ghost. At my command, the forces of nature could pick up that airplane and send it soaring through the skies - without runway or engines!”

“That would be one solution...”

“With serious consequences. Do you know how many government agencies would start sniffing around here, trying to find out what was going on, if a plane stuck in the snow suddenly turned up in Helena?”

Gandhi ruminated briefly. “Dealing with government agencies can be a challenge.”

“That’s something else which hasn’t changed since your day. They cause trouble for innocent people, but do nothing to help the masses.”

“You must do what you think best.”

“What I think best,” dejectedly, she glanced at the mantle clock, “is that I head out and water the horses before dark.”

Part of her circuit around the property on horseback took her near the plane. This time, she dismounted in the twilight and circled the craft. The tires were completely invisible beneath the snow; it was a wonder no one had noticed the lack of skid marks or tracks of any kind leading up to the spot. Nor had anyone speculated on how easily a half-mile strip of ground directly to the north could be converted into a runway...

There might be potential to the plan, but who to man the Cessna’s controls for take-off? The captain and his co-pilot would think her mad if she approached them with the idea. She knew no one else skilled in flying.

And she wouldn't dare attempt the feat herself, powers or no.

She steered Heartbeat back to the barn, a delightful aroma reaching her nose even before she entered the kitchen. Kanti had prepared a vegetarian meal at her great-great-grandfather's behest, and placed the dishes on the table as Mustang yanked off her boots.

This was the kind of meal Mustang enjoyed. Accustomed to frequent dinner-time arguments between her parents, sharing laughs and stories with her guests helped her appetite and digestion.

They played gin rummy after the dishes were washed and stacked to dry. The Mahatma, reputed for his wisdom and tranquility, became quite agitated when his descendant caught him with enough points in his hand to lose.

"You cheated!" he accused playfully.

Kanti retorted, "How could I cheat, when you were dealing the cards?"

Mustang switched on the television only long enough to catch the weather report for the following day. The snowfall would be ending, allowing plows to make progress clearing the county roads. Giving the crews an extra twelve hours, the girl calculated Kanti would be able to catch a ride to Helena, and charter a flight to Tampa Bay by Saturday morning.

That left her with Gandhi.

"I will take him with me," Kanti declared, when Mustang laid out the time table.

"That would not be wise, my child," responded the elder.

"Isn't that for me to decide?"

"How would you explain me to your father?"

"He would be honored to stand in your presence, as am I."

"Say that is so. How would he explain me to those who share his business and life?"

Kanti flew into a rage. "Why would you deny me my rights? Everyone tries to deny me my rights! I'm going to college, certainly, but I'm not allowed to study what interests me. When I graduate, I will be given a secretarial position in my father's New Delhi business headquarters, until such time as he decides I should marry and have children. After that, I will never work outside the home again. If I protest this treatment, I am deemed ungrateful and rebellious."

"Obedience is a noble virtue," quoted Gandhi.

"You were not obedient, Babu! Had you been, India would still be a colony of Great Britain!"

"It is different for a man. The fathers, brothers and husbands must work to better their lives and those of their families..."

“Women can do that, too,” Mustang interjected. “Especially in the 21st century.”

“By abandoning their duties to home and children?”

“There are countless women who are more intelligent, more courageous, than their husbands, fathers and brothers!” added Kanti. “Women abandoned by the men who sired their children labor long hours to pay bills and keep food on the table. Women whose husbands refuse to work or do not earn enough to pay the bills valiantly venture into the workplace to help maintain the roof over their heads. Women are no longer silent citizens whose lives are dictated by men. They are fully capable of making their own decisions.”

The great man bowed his head. “This is not proper behavior...”

“Sixty years ago, maybe not,” Mustang said. “Now, except for certain countries, women are granted the freedom to decide the course of their own lives.”

“If such is the case,” Gandhi eyed his great-great-granddaughter, “how would your life be different?”

“Respectfully, Bapu, I would switch my major from business management to visual arts. I would learn to make films, and use that knowledge to record the tragedies which occur every day in our country. If more people knew the truth of what happens among the castes in India, the changes you began so long ago might see a resurgence, bringing equality to all.”

“Have not such films been made by men?”

Kanti bit her lip. “Bapu, it doesn’t matter if the film is made by a man or a woman. If it is honest, it will help. What has been done so far has been limited by censorship from the government - crews from America, Britain and other countries, wanting to tell our story, but restricted from interviewing the most destitute and oppressed. As an Indian myself, I would be able to travel where outsiders cannot, and record the reality of those who earn a pittance each day working in American-built factories and offices, but dwell in hovels and pick through garbage dumps to live.”

Gandhi opened himself to Kanti’s enthusiasm. “I may refuse to go with you to Florida, but you have my blessing for this work.”

Kanti knelt at the gnarled man’s feet, her hands together in prayerful gratitude. “Thank you, Bapu. Your understanding means more to me than anything in the world.”

He raised her gently to her feet. “Your love means as much to me. Perhaps my efforts were not entirely in vain...”

“They weren’t,” Mustang asserted. “Someday people will see how right you were, but human beings can be stubborn.” She yawned. “And, I don’t know about you, but I’m tired. We’d better get to bed.”

Kanti retired to the guest room, and Gandhi settled himself on Mustang’s bed. Not liking the prospect of sleeping on the uncomfortable desk chair, the girl grabbed a blanket and wrapped herself up on the sofa, watching the dying fire as her eyes closed.

IV

Vivid dreams plagued Mustang’s slumber - a pilgrimage through remote districts of India, Gandhi at her side, aghast at how the poor survived on a bare minimum of food, without decent shelter or proper sanitation. Those who died were consigned to a massive funeral pyre, reduced to ashes, which then filtered into the rivers and streams, further polluting the water supply.

The girl jolted awake when she rolled off the sofa onto the floor. She coughed, strands of red hair stuck in her mouth. The mantle clock read 5:00 AM, late for her.

In the pastures, horses would be waiting for their morning drink. Mustang never saw herself as a slave to the animals; on certain days, she wished for the kind of freedom they enjoyed: no school, no worries, no chores.

Thus, she embarked on her rounds of the water troughs, pickaxe in thickly gloved hands. The ranch hands were stirring, too, delivering fresh bundles of hay to the fields.

She overheard a conversation which piqued her interest upon nearing the Cessna jet. “I’d love to take that baby for a fly,” a baritone cut through the silence.

“You a pilot?” asked his partner off-loading the wagon.

“Used to be. My dad flew during Vietnam, off the USS Kitty Hawk. I thought I wanted to follow him into the Navy. They wouldn’t take me, though, because of my eyes.”

“What’s wrong with your eyes?”

“Glaucoma.”

“That’s an old people’s disease.”

“Tell my doctor that. If they hadn’t done surgery on me when I was five months old, I’d be blind today because of some inherited gene.”

Mustang wished she could see the faces of the two men; she didn’t recognize the voices. The availability of even an unlicensed pilot might prove advantageous, if she decided to send the aircraft on its way...

It had to stop snowing first. She cursed the weather forecasters under her breath, flakes sprinkling her coat and Heartbeat's mane. She refused to use her power to alter the jet stream, cold and warm fronts. It might occur unintentionally on occasion, but to deliberately command the snow to stop wasn't a risk she wanted to take.

So, she waited with what patience she could muster. As the sun rose, filtered through thick clouds, she sat in the living room sipping hot cocoa before the dormant fireplace. The curtains were open, enabling her to see when the snowfall ceased.

That didn't happen until 10:00, and she'd taken two phone calls by then - one from her mother, reporting the car should be repaired by 5:00 that afternoon, the other from the local television news, wanting her reaction to the plane sitting in the western pasture.

"No comment," she snapped, slamming down the receiver.

She had entertained a distinct mistrust of doctors, lawyers and reporters since childhood. Fortunately, she could heal herself if the need arose, she kept out of legal trouble, and kept her mouth shut in the public forum. The only other skill she required was the ability to return Gandhi to dust.

Harkening back to her dream, the idea made her shiver. She could use fire to consume the man's bodily form, as had been done after his death. Would he feel the pain of being burned alive? she speculated.

In the natural order - as she'd once read during her comparative religion class - a body went from "ashes to ashes, dust to dust" over a period of decomposition. Could this dilemma be solved by such a simple directive?

The test would come later, for Gandhi and Kanti joined her in the living room late morning. "We've been talking," the college student began.

"About what?"

Gandhi smiled. "Many things."

"Like leaving the ranch?"

"That was one."

"Has Kanti convinced you to accompany her to Florida?"

"No."

"Good." Only when Mustang exhaled did she realize she'd been holding her breath.

Kanti noted, "Bapu has convinced me to stand up for myself with my father, even if it means being disinherited."

"My great-great-granddaughter is very wise for her age. I believe she can accomplish anything her heart inspires her to pursue."

“I’m glad,” Mustang said. “How ‘bout something to eat?”

“Thank you, no,” refused Gandhi. “I believe it is time for me to go.” He held out his hand. Kanti’s gold starburst pendant had been bent back into shape. The glass orb in the center of the design remained fragmented, a result of being dropped in the bathtub.

It can’t be as simple as that! Mustang mused.

Kanti kissed and embraced Gandhi one last time, then returned to the bedroom.

Mustang knew she was being prompted to act, but uncertainty weighed heavily upon her mind. Such doubt might make any words she uttered ineffective...

Having the Father of India standing there, staring at her, didn’t help.

She set the pendant on the coffee table. “We’ll do this later. I’m...”

“I understand, Mustang-ji. When the moment is right, the pieces will fall into place.”

The pieces *had* fallen into place - to get the plane moved. She moved toward the bathroom. “I’m going to get cleaned up and handle another small matter before my parents get home. Do you want to wait here, or come along?”

“Given the way my body reacted to our... activities yesterday out in the snow, I believe I should remain indoors.”

“Fine. Fix yourself something to eat, please. Tell Kanti she can log on to the internet, if she wishes, or you can watch TV. Just don’t answer the phone, or the door.”

“Very well.”

Bundled in a snowsuit, Mustang tramped across the yard to the bunkhouse. The winter crew of ranch hands were relaxing around a wood stove which supplemented the heating system.

“Hey, Mustang!” greeted one of the men. “I think three of the mares from the north corral are going to foal in the spring.”

“That’s good news. There may be another half dozen from the stock in the western pasture.”

“It’ll be a busy season, then.”

“Sure will,” the girl agreed. “Which of you is the pilot?”

A squat, bull-necked blond rose. Thick spectacles confirmed his eye problems. “I *was* a pilot. Why?”

“I need your help. Get dressed.”

The pair rode the snowmobile out to the Cessna, snow-shrouded and forlorn. “What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to fly it to Helena airport.”

“Are you crazy? This isn’t a helicopter! It can’t take off without at least a 3500 foot long runway!”

“You get the engines started. I’ll supply the runway.”

He glared at her. “You’re...”

“Nuts, I know. But if you ever tell anyone what you see here, your head will explode.”

He recoiled. “I’m heading back to the bunkhouse.”

“No, you’re not.” She befuddled him just enough he didn’t take a step, so she shifted her concentration onto the private jet. “Clear the wings.”

A stiff blast of air removed every bit of ice and snow from the fuselage.

“Point the nose north, and provide appropriate winds for take-off.”

An invisible giant hand couldn’t have picked up the plane and turned it more easily.

The last directive: “Snow, congeal and form a smooth path for the wheels.”

The former pilot’s jaw dropped as the frozen runway created itself. “I don’t believe it!”

“That doesn’t matter. Get aboard and get it out of here. I’ll send one of the guys into town to pick you up.”

“Take-offs on ice can be dangerous...”

“You’ll have all the help I can muster,” Mustang assured him.

And she coaxed the wind to lift the craft just when it seemed the runway was a thousand feet too short. When the blinking lights were no longer visible in the sky, she orchestrated the elements to erase the impromptu airstrip and impression of sunken tires.

Not a moment too soon. Up from the road paraded a caravan of men, pulling bulky equipment on sleds, led by the captain. Glimpsing her on the idling snowmobile, he cut loose his load and sped toward her.

“Where in hell’s the plane?” he bellowed.

She snickered, “Not hell. Helena. At the airport.”

“Are you telling me it was moved without my permission?”

“I thought you wanted it moved. This way, there was no need to remove the wings or tear up my father’s property. If you don’t mind, instruct your people to haul those contraptions out of here, before I have you arrested for trespassing.”

“You wouldn’t dare!”

“Not me, perhaps, but I’m sure my father wouldn’t hesitate, when his livelihood is endangered.”

The pilot's tone softened. "Tell me one thing: how many men did it take to move it?"

"No men," she sneered, circling him on the snowmobile, "just a woman."

She left him, jaw gaping, hoping he wouldn't delve too deeply into the mystery. Most people would be satisfied neither extraordinary effort nor tremendous expense would be necessary to rectify the dilemma. If he wasn't of that ilk, the very trouble she intended to avoid might come knocking on her door.

Best not to worry, she decided as the snowmobile bounced over uneven ground. She was traveling far faster than she had with Kanti and Gandhi as passengers, and she didn't care. This was as close as she'd come, until spring, to the sensation which invigorated her on horseback.

She walked into the brick dwelling to find her guests hovering near the computer, muttering in Hindu. Kanti waved Mustang closer, her dark eyes leaving the monitor only for a split second.

"What it is?" inquired Mustang, shedding her boots on the kitchen tile, and laying the damp snowsuit, gloves and hat on the dinette table.

"I came across this by chance," the college student explained. "I was trying to show Bapu how many authors have referenced him in their work..."

Gandhi rose from the swivel chair so Mustang could seat herself, the better to view the screen. As her hazel orbs widened, his lips curled in wry anger.

"I don't believe it!" cried Mustang. She checked the website address, to be certain the article wasn't a satire posted on one of the numerous parody news pages. She had to resign herself to the fact the *Washington Post* didn't report such accusations in jest.

"I used every bit of logic to encourage both Hindu and Muslim to peacefully coexist," the Mahatma declared. "A unified India after the British withdrew would have been proof people of differing faiths can live together. The Muslims refused, determined to form their own separate government on their own land. That the descendants of those men can blame me now for the violence in Pakistan is ludicrous."

Indeed, the president of Pakistan was quoted condemning Gandhi for riots and deaths which had taken place months earlier on the Indian feast commemorating Bapu's birthday. "Terrorists defied our immigration ban, crossing our borders from the south and setting off home-made bombs in our marketplaces and schools," that official stated. "These actions by those who hold Gandhi's memory sacred prove he promoted a racist, anti-Muslim agenda which continues to this day."

With a sigh, Mustang shut down the computer and swung her seat toward the pair. “That is the way of the world, Gandhiji. Those who refuse to take responsibility for their own actions lay blame on the innocent.”

“For that man to defame Bapu...” Kanti raged.

“Is his right by free speech. The journalists are more at fault, in my mind, for printing such garbage without bothering to interview any of the survivors of the bombings.”

“Because they are in Pakistani prisons, awaiting execution.”

Gandhi murmured, “The important thing is: *we* know the truth. If I were to venture forth and demand proof from the man of his statements, no good would come of it. Those who know the message I spread during my lifetime will hold it in their hearts, still. The few who have distorted it to justify violence will, someday, see their error.”

“The same thing can be said of the Muslims,” Mustang concurred. “The Qu’ran, from my reading of it in school, in no way condones suicide bombings or the murder of those who hold different beliefs. A handful of fanatics have twisted the words, and how many lives has it cost?”

“You are wise, Mustang-ji. Always remember to speak openly against such fanaticism, in favor of non-violent change.”

The teen swallowed hard, remembering her experience living vicariously during World War II inside a German soldier’s body. Fanaticism took many forms, and usually led to the death of those who wished solely for a quiet existence.

Again, Gandhi held out the starburst pendant to Mustang. Seeing the other loose ends tied up in this latest mess, she raised the necklace by its chain.

She watched the man’s eyes as she spoke. “Restore the ash of Mahatma Gandhi to this orb, and render the glass intact once more.”

A tear trickled down his cheek an instant before the moisture from his body splashed in a puddle on the living room carpet, leaving tiny grains to swirl in a mini-tornado before being sucked into the pendant.

Simultaneously, Maggie and Joe Duryea shuffled through the front door, bags and bundles in hand.

“What’s going on here?” Joe barked.

Kanti regrouped first. “I... spilled a glass of water.”

“It was an accident, Dad,” added Mustang. “I bumped Kanti getting my coat to head out and water the horses...”

The excuses successfully covered up the truth. Maggie deposited her burden on the kitchen table, grabbed a towel from the kitchen and proceeded to

dab the stain from the short brown nap. Joe wedged open the refrigerator and slid two gallons of milk onto the top shelf.

“Your pilot is here, Miss. He says they’re ready to leave any time you are.”

Kanti shot Mustang a suspicious look. The teen grinned. “It wasn’t as difficult to get the plane out of the west pasture as they initially thought.”

“Ah... Good,” remarked the college student. “I’ll pack my bags.”

“You’re welcome to stay another night,” Maggie invited.

“No, thank you. I’ve been so looking forward to seeing my parents, to delay even one more day would be unthinkable.”

Mustang followed Kanti into the guest room, helping gather the silk garments into expensive luggage.

“This has been a winter break I won’t soon forget,” Kanti admitted.

“Me, neither.”

“You must come visit me at the University of Portland, after I change my major.”

“You think your father will let you?”

“I am Gandhi’s great-great-granddaughter. I will persuade him to see things my way.” She smiled, her tanned face alight.

Together, the two returned to the living room. Stern and suspicious, the captain sipped a cup of coffee while he waited for Kanti. From Mustang’s perspective, he hadn’t mentioned the unusual circumstances of the aircraft’s flight to Helena airport to the Duryeas. She wondered if he would question Kanti about it on the flight to Florida.

The girls embraced before Kanti glided out the door. Her relief short-lived, Mustang turned toward her coat and boots, ready to tend her beloved horses.