

The Mustang Chronicles:

Visionary Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

Of all the family gatherings Mustang Duryea despised, funerals were the worst. Being an only child, she wasn't used to interacting with a hoard of relatives. All the old women gushed about how much she'd grown, and called her Elizabeth - her given name, but not even used in her own home.

Having to drive nearly 300 miles to Boise, Idaho, made the experience more frustrating.

"Bryan was your father's favorite cousin growing up," admonished Maggie Duryea from the front seat of the Chevy Suburban, when her daughter protested yet again about the journey. "It wouldn't be right not to go."

The teen countered, "It's just a stiff in a box."

"How insensitive!"

"Maybe, but still the truth."

Since seeing her first corpse in a casket - her paternal grandfather - at age six, Mustang held funerals were a waste of time and money. She'd been severely scolded by her mother for standing at the back of the funeral chapel, laughing at her great-aunts as they sobbed on the shoulders of their husbands. She tried her best not to squirm during the minister's trite eulogy, and preferred to roam the cemetery, picking dandelions, while the rest of the assembly said their final farewells at the gravesite.

Though her grief and confusion at unsuspectingly killing Jack Parsons just six weeks earlier had yet to diminish, she was secretly glad the FBI had confiscated the body from the grounds of Boleskine House and handled the interment, with no fuss or public display. That way, she only had to deal with the after-effects of the bizarre powers the occultist had transferred to her.

Knowing she had merely to speak a word to make natural phenomena occur - like oaks catching fire spontaneously, or rain falling without clouds - Mustang hadn't attended school since her abrupt return from Scotland via a lightning bolt. She'd never gotten along well in social settings, and didn't tolerate insults. To utter a phrase in frustration, and find a fellow student suddenly charred to a crisp... Not an encouraging prospect.

She spent even these cold days of the early Montana winter wandering her father's vast horse ranch. A peace for her troubled soul could be found among the leafless trees and foraging animals.

Until this.

Balint's Mortuary occupied a two-story brick store front in an older section of Boise. The Balint family had buried members of the Duryea clan for more than five decades and, obviously, the tradition continued.

The tradition continued, as well, of buxom blue-hairs clustered together in the mum-scented hall, sniffing behind lace-trimmed hankies. Mustang bit her lip passing between them, en route to the obligatory viewing of the deceased.

She'd met Bryan Duryea once in her life. He visited his cousin's ranch the spring of the big storms, spending weeks helping clear the pastures of fallen trees and debris, so the horses could return to their grazing. He'd laughed a lot, and his strong arms bulged through flannel shirts, she recalled. Something had changed in the meantime, it was clear - the frame nestled among quilted padding appeared thin and frail.

He'd died after a three year battle with cancer, Mustang overheard.

She turned toward the matter-of-fact contralto, leaving her parents to comment on the brass trim and expensive wood of the casket. Surrounded by a cluster of black-clad elders, the slender young woman positively shown in a pale yellow ensemble.

Beside her stood a tall, impressive gentleman in blue pin-stripe suit and tie. A blond mane was combed over his high forehead, and blue eyes burned with an intensity Mustang hadn't seen since... Jack Parsons.

Damn his memory.

The girl watched Joe and Maggie Duryea approach the pair, offering their condolences. Surely, Mustang thought, this isn't Bryan's widow?

No, the widow had established herself on the other end of the room, wailing of her loss to anyone who would listen. Kristi Duryea had been Bryan's second wife, after a messy divorce which scandalized most in the family. Gina, Bryan's high school sweetheart, had endured much from her first husband and, after their parting, married again, only to die shortly thereafter of an unexpected heart attack.

The tranquil young woman was introduced to Mustang as Gina and Bryan's 22-year-old daughter, Rachel. The man beside her was her step-father, Peter O'Donnell - as Irish as could be.

Staring down at Mustang, O'Donnell didn't release her hand as quickly as he had the others. "When all this is over, you must have dinner with Rachel and myself."

"There are plenty of other relatives who'll be demanding her time," objected the girl.

"But none more deserving of it."

Mustang sensed he detected her secret, just by touching her fingers or, perhaps, brushing the still-healing wounds on her palms, where the lightning bolt had torn through her flesh while transporting her thousands of miles in a split second.

“I... think we’re heading back to Montana right after tomorrow’s service.”

“I’ll ask your parents if you can stay with us for a few days, then we can drive you home.”

She gulped. “It’s not like we’re a few miles down the road, Mr. O’Donnell. It’s a six hour trip, one way.”

“It will be your only chance to get acquainted with your cousin, before we leave.”

“Leave?”

“For Ireland. We’d been living in Dublin, coming back just a month ago, when Bryan’s end was near. After we settle the estate, there will be no reason for her to stay here...”

“Ireland. Wow. I’d really like...” In the nick of time, Mustang stopped herself from uttering what might have been a more-than-embarrassing phrase. To have the mortuary destroyed by a rogue flash of lightning would warrant too many explanations - when she returned from the unplanned journey.

“We’d really like if you’d join us. I’ll arrange it with your parents.”

She nodded her approval.

A fresh wave of mourners approached, effectively shoving Mustang into the periphery of the crowd. Joe and Maggie standing with another couple - possibly more cousins - near the door, the girl opted for an ornate loveseat along the wall.

Bored by the milling bodies and din of voices, she almost fell asleep. The impact of an exhausted Rachel on the cushion beside her roused Mustang from her stupor.

“A senseless waste, don’t you think?” A hint of Irish brogue colored the lithe brunette’s speech.

“You got that right.”

“You know any of these people?”

“Besides my mom and dad, no.”

Rachel scanned the faces of the uncomfortable youngsters and jaded oldsters. “Want to go for a walk?”

“Sure. But won’t they expect you to...”

“Kristi is commanding all the attention, as it is. Nobody’ll notice.”

The pair rose and wound their way from the chapel. Grabbing coats from the cluttered cloak room, they slipped out the door onto an eerily gloomy street.

“The fresh air feels good,” sighed Rachel.

Mustang chuckled. “Even if it does smell like rotting garbage.”

“Better than some of that cheap perfume. Why do octogenarians pour it on so heavy?”

“Same reason they cake on the powder and rouge.”

“Y’know what Peter and I think?”

“You think I’m a Russian spy,” ventured Mustang.

“No,” Rachel laughed, a lyrical sound. “We think you understand.”

“Understand what?”

“Everything.”

“Huh?”

Rachel drew Mustang along the sidewalk. The chill wind reddened their cheeks and froze their ears, but the idea of putting a bit of distance between them and Balint’s seemed desirable.

“When Mom married Peter, I was 12. He took us to Ireland, and my life’s been an adventure ever since. The people there have a different focus on life - most of them, anyway. I discovered the true meaning of beauty, creativity, and faith.”

“What’s that got to do with me?” Mustang prodded.

“Your red hair was instantly recognizable when you entered the room tonight.”

“Recognizable?”

“I am plagued by a terrible gift,” said Rachel.

“I know the feeling.”

This unexpected comment made Rachel’s eyebrows arch quizzically. Mustang dismissed the remark with a submissive flourish of her hands.

“A few weeks ago, I had a vision of a woman at the summit of Croagh Patrick.”

“What’s Croagh Patrick?”

“A sacred hill in Ireland, where St. Patrick supposedly banished the snakes from the island. Many are the mystical places there - castle ruins, abandoned monasteries, incredible burial mounds. Peter and I have visited all of them since Mom died. There’s a very... unique sensation, almost tangible, in those places. It’s as if the wisdom of those who dwelt there across the ages permeates the place.”

“Ah.”

“The woman I saw stood in the center of many prominent historical figures. She glowed like a beacon, and gave sage advice to those most brilliant minds.”

“And you think I...”

“Both Peter and I do. He’s the only one who knows about my visions, while I know about his... ESP.”

“Painful knowledge.”

“Indeed. You know first hand?”

“Literally.” Passing beneath a streetlight, she turned her palms upward. Rachel’s eyes widened in horror. “What happened?”

Jack Parsons had cautioned the teen about revealing the truth, and the trouble it would cause. Despite Rachel being her cousin, Mustang couldn’t - and didn’t know how, if she’d wanted to break her silence.

“You don’t trust me?” challenged the older girl.

“I don’t trust myself.”

“How so?”

“If I say the wrong thing, the damage could be irreparable.”

Rachel urged, “Show me, please.”

No trees close at hand to set afire, Mustang considered her options. All the brick facades lining the narrow lane were dark. Simple enough to utter the command, “Light all the windows on this block.”

Full daylight could have been no brighter. Rachel gasped, twirling to see every glass illuminated by more than mere electricity. “No elaborate incantations, no wild gestures...”

“Nope.”

“What else can you do?”

“I don’t know,” Mustang confessed. “And I don’t want to know.”

The brilliance faded.

“Could you raise the dead?”

“You mean, your dad?”

“Of course not!” cried Rachel, then lowered her tone. “He’s better off where he is, after suffering so long. No, I meant the war dead from the many battles on Irish soil, some of whom haunt the fields and churches...”

“Why would you want that?”

“Don’t you see? To learn from them first-hand what it means to fight for one’s beliefs...”

“I wouldn’t want to try. Once they were raised up, what would become of them? They couldn’t be left to wander freely, in an age not their own.”

Rachel studied her cousin's determined face. "You understand far more than I. I'm sorry."

Together, they retraced their steps to the mortuary. "Don't apologize. Since I... this... I've wondered if there are any limits to... what I can do. In order to find out, I might end up killing everyone I know, and devastating the countryside. It's not like in TV or movies, where there's always a happy ending. I had a dream a few nights ago I was the President, with my hand over the button, ready to launch the bombs..."

"A terrible burden for one so young."

Mustang smirked, then sobered at the sight of her parents, Peter and other relatives rushing toward them.

"Why didn't you tell us you were stepping out for some air, girl?" grunted Joe.

"I didn't want to interrupt your conversation..."

Maggie erupted, "Never, never do that again! In a strange city, who knows what might've happened?"

"They were perfectly safe," stated Peter calmly, pushing through the crush, his arms encircling both girls protectively. "You forget, Rachel grew up here."

"And hasn't spent any real time here for ten years!" Maggie snapped. "Things have changed..."

"Mom, it's okay," soothed Mustang. "Let's get back inside."

As the group retreated into the building, Rachel whispered, "If the rest of the family wasn't here, would they have come looking for you?"

"They never have before."

"I can smell insincerity 100 meters away."

"Which is why you were standing so far from Kristi?" queried Mustang. Rachel grinned.

They never reached the chapel. The last few stragglers from the viewing were collecting their coats in the lobby, with the latest generation of the Balints politely urging them toward the door. Maggie, Joe, Rachel, Peter, Mustang and the rest found themselves back on the street in a matter of seconds.

Similar to a church parking lot at the conclusion of Sunday services, cars positioned beside the mortuary starting moving simultaneously.

Except the Chevy Suburban. Joe unlocked the passenger door for his wife, then climbed behind the wheel, met with silence when he turned the key. Mustang remained nearby, trying to formulate a way to say good night to Peter and Rachel, rather flummoxed by their strange encounter.

Until Joe leapt from the vehicle and confronted his daughter. “You did this, girl!”

“What?” Mustang protested.

“You didn’t want to come, so you’re punishing us!”

“I...”

Maggie joined the fray. “Your father and I have seen how you’ve destroyed sections of the ranch. Whatever’s wrong with you, this is just further proof.”

Rachel defended her cousin. “How could she have done anything?”

“You two were out here for quite some time,” snarled Joe. “It would take less than a minute to rip off the distributor wires, or foul the spark plugs...”

“It wasn’t Mustang,” Peter interspersed, squatting beside the Suburban’s front left tire.

“How can you be sure?”

O’Donnell pointed at the asphalt. “By the size of this puddle, I’d say you cracked your oil pan.”

Joe stooped to inspect the pool of liquid, then straightened. “Damn!”

“Is he right, Joe?” asked Maggie.

“Afraid so. We’re stuck.”

Another couple, having eavesdropped on the exchange, stepped from their Ford Escort. “We’ll drive you to your hotel.”

“Thanks,” Joe breathed.

One difficulty, though: the compact size of the car. Once Joe loaded the luggage into the trunk, and given two children already sat in the back seat, there wasn’t room for Mustang.

And her parents really didn’t seem to care. “You evidently prefer the company of your... new friends. You can go with them.”

Choking back sobs - at the false accusation, lack of apology and callous abandonment - Mustang gazed from Rachel to Peter. “You don’t mind?”

“Of course not!” Rachel beamed. “The house is too big for just two people, anyway...”

“Two?” echoed Mustang. “What about Kristi?”

“She’s already moved out. Dad’s will left her the money, while I got the ‘tangible property’.”

“Which you don’t really need.”

“Come on, ladies,” Peter insisted, the Escort gone. “It’s too cold to stand around here, when there’s a warm fire waiting at home.”

Rachel added, “And dinner. I’m starved.”

“How can you eat...” wondered Mustang.

“Deep within, you already know the answer,” Peter replied. “Just as Rachel does. The truth is nestled in the recesses of your brain, and simply needs to be coaxed into the conscious mind.”

“Huh?”

“Life is but one day after another,” Rachel explained, walking toward a sleek Mercedes. “The events which fill those days may be different, but the need to sleep, eat and wash is constant.”

Mustang gulped. “Oh, hell...”

II

Peter O'Donnell was right, Mustang realized. Growing up, she'd discovered how the days ran together in a flurry of activity - watering and grooming horses, tending to the foals, mending fences - anchored by the necessities of food, rest and shelter. She also recalled her high school comparative religion class, where she'd read the statement the first time.

“You've studied Zen?” the girl inquired.

Rachel smiled, waving her companion into the Mercedes' front seat. “I've studied world religions for years, trying to learn why I have visions.”

“You could have more serious problems.”

“True. The worst part, though, is not being believed.”

“I know *that* feeling. And holding it all inside makes you feel like your heart will explode.”

“Exactly!” agreed Rachel. “The whole reason I stayed with Peter after Mom died was because he empathized with my gift. His ESP gives him... a very metaphysical perspective on life.”

“What does he do for a living?”

O'Donnell had heard every word. “These days, I produce travel documentaries for the Irish Tourism Council. I used to be a journalist.”

Rachel related how, during Peter's career with a Dublin newspaper, he would rely on extra-sensory perception - and his step-daughter's visions - to break news other reporters didn't pursue until days later. When some criminal interests, and the courts, pressed him to reveal his sources, he quit the business and started his own company.

The conversation ended there, temporarily. Turning onto a concrete drive north of Boise, Mustang was awed by the vast mansion looming beneath the moonlight. “This was Bryan's house?”

“Yes,” mumbled Rachel solemnly.

“What did *he* do for a living?”

The car parked beneath the portico, and the trio shuffled through double walnut doors into an exquisite entrance hall - two stories high, with a wall of glass at the east end, and a magnificent curved staircase.

“Twenty years ago, he inherited his father’s liquor store in town. Within a decade, he’d expanded to three dozen locations in three states,” Rachel commented.

“I knew people drank a lot, but, wow!”

“This place was Kristi’s idea. She wanted the best of everything. Dad... well...”

“What?”

“Come on, I’ll show you.”

Rachel led her cousin toward the rear of the house, through a fabulous kitchen, into a three-stall garage. In the far corner, she pulled a lever secreted in a tool cabinet. A trap door opened and lights shone on a narrow wooden staircase.

The chamber below - running the full length of the house, well insulated and water-proof - held more kegs and boxes than the stockrooms of most retail outlets.

“Okay, I don’t get it,” sputtered Mustang.

“To pay for Kristi’s extravagant tastes, Dad started illegally importing liquor from Canada, and selling it to bars and restaurants.”

“Oh, hell...”

“He never got caught, thankfully.”

Peter, poised on the top step, observed, “He left it to his daughter to dispose of the incriminating evidence.”

“How...”

“We won’t worry about that now. Does spaghetti sound good for dinner?”

Both young women consented and mounted the stairs to the main level.

Rachel secured the trap before following Mustang into the house.

Preparing a tossed salad and garlic bread, while O’Donnell boiled water on the six-burner stove, Mustang prodded, “You have no idea how to ditch that stuff, do you?”

“Not the slightest,” admitted Rachel.

“This place being set at the base of a hill, it wouldn’t be difficult to cause a mudslide and bury it all...”

“No!” Peter barked. “You may have toyed around torching trees and sprouting flowers, but nature has a way of retaliating when human beings alter the natural order.”

“Meaning what, exactly?”

“If you remember only one rule when using your power, it should be to never, ever deliberately change the weather for your own purposes.”

“But...”

He poured a box of angel hair pasta in the steaming pot and set aside the long wooden spoon. His blue eyes scathed her. “Like Rachel, yours is a phenomenal gift, which can easily be abused and twisted to... less than noble ends. Natural forces may respond when you call, and manifest themselves the only way they can, but to tamper with their normal cycle is to invite destruction.”

“You mean, the lightning which carried me home from Scotland came in answer to my wish to go home, but to command the rains to relieve drought-afflicted farms...”

“You could well bring about flooding which would destroy more than the drought itself.”

Mustang exhaled loudly. “Now I know I’m too young to have such power. One wrong word...”

“You just need to be careful,” consoled Rachel, pulling the garlic bread from the toaster oven.

“I keep telling myself that. There are times when I say things, though, without thinking...”

“And, you will pay for them,” Peter warned. “Never forget: any harm you cause, you must rectify.”

“How did you get to be so wise?”

Rachel snickered. “He caused his own share of harm, back in the day.”

“What harm?” Mustang set the plates and silverware around the island in the middle of the kitchen, while Peter arranged the bar stools.

“For many years, I grasped the specialness of my ESP, and resented the bullies in school who viewed me as a freak. I became somewhat self-righteous, and managed to get some of them in serious trouble by telling the teachers and the police where they’d be on Saturday nights. I wound up in hospital with a broken arm and a concussion and, when that didn’t dissuade me, a fractured jaw.”

The three sat down to a tasty meal, and soon succumbed to the day’s stress. Rachel led Mustang up to a sumptuous guest room, twice as large as her bedroom at home. The teen slipped into her pajamas and fell asleep, despite a rush of ideas swirling in her brain.

The clock on the night stand shown 3:00 when a scream roused her. She scrambled from beneath the quilt and scurried down the hall to Rachel's room. The door was already open, and Peter, blond mop uncombed, stood at the bedside.

Rachel's brown eyes stared at the ceiling, unblinking. Sweat matted her hair and trickled down her cheeks.

"What happened?" Mustang queried.

"Her dreams can be very real sometimes. The past three nights, since Bryan died, she's had the same one, over and over."

"What it is about?"

"She can't remember when she wakes. She's plagued, however, by a sense of impending doom..."

"Wouldn't it be great if others could see what she sees - like watching a TV?"

Rachel lurched upright, seizing Mustang's arm. Across the room, a small television crackled to life without the aid of a remote control. Only then did Mustang reflect on what she'd said.

"Oh, hell..."

A blur of images gradually solidified into a scene which might have been shot for a movie. Visible at the end of a narrow aisle, a lone figure - Rachel herself - stood, while liquor bottles and kegs lining the shelves toppled and broke, or were thrown at her by someone unseen. A black Scottish terrier scampered back and forth through the shattered glass, yipping madly. Pummeled by the barrage, Rachel sank to the concrete floor, bleeding and bruised.

The three watched in silence until Rachel could take no more. She covered her face with trembling hands, sobbing uncontrollably.

The television screen faded into blackness.

"What does it mean?" asked Mustang.

Peter wrapped his arms around his step-daughter, his countenance careworn. "Didn't you recognize the room?"

"Not really. A store room, maybe."

"Or the chamber below the garage?" hinted the man.

Mustang's expression confirmed his statement.

"Given the presence of the dog, Rachel's subconscious may be warning her of Kristi's plan to implicate her in the smuggling operation."

"What's the dog got to do with it?"

"I'm surprised he wasn't at the mortuary last night," Rachel sniffed through her tears. "He goes everywhere with her."

“Why would she want to frame you? You haven’t been around to cause her any trouble...”

“She desperately wants the will nullified, so she can lay claim to the house and the rest of the estate. She won’t be happy until she has it all.”

“Did she know about the illegal liquor shipments?” Mustang prodded.

The young woman declared, “Her uncle on the Border Patrol arranged for the trucks to pass the checkpoint, unsearched, during his shifts.”

“So, she knows about the trap door?”

Peter nodded. “And we can’t do a thing to stop her.”

“Wanna bet?”

Rachel and her step-father stared at their guest.

“It may be unethical to manipulate the weather, but that doesn’t mean I can’t seal a hole in the floor...”

“There’s another entrance,” supplied Rachel.

“Huh?”

“The trap door is too small to fit the crates and kegs. There’s a tunnel from the store room leading to the gardener’s shed, behind the pool house. From what I saw before Dad died, the trucks would take a deserted service road around the back of the property, loading and unloading there.”

Mustang yawned. “Before we leave for the funeral in the morning, you can show me.”

“Do you think it wise to use your power in this way?” Peter speculated.

“To protect the innocent from the greedy? How else *should* I use it?”

The two girls remained together, while Peter shuffled to the kitchen to make a pot of coffee.

“You are so lucky to have Peter watching over you,” commented Mustang.

“He’s not the step-parent of fairy tales, that’s for sure. He loved my mom dearly, and was appreciative of her visions, because of his own psychic gift, I think. He’s been the same with me, keeping me out of trouble - especially when the visions caused me a bad time during my term at Trinity College - but I really wish my Dad would’ve taken a greater interest in me before it was too late.”

“You inherited your... ability from your mom?”

“I guess so.”

“And Bryan didn’t understand...”

“I don’t know. We never talked about it. After the divorce, I rarely spoke with him, and then he married Kristi...”

“And he focused more on his new wife?”

“She made sure he didn’t have a choice. She resented me, and even threw some of Christmas and birthday gifts he bought for me in the trash before they could be mailed.”

“At least, you weren’t in the middle of whatever arguments they must’ve had. My mom and dad constantly bicker, and I get to listen to every word.”

“Is that why you love the horses so much?”

“I definitely get more genuine affection from them.”

“Tell me about the ranch. It must be beautiful.”

“It *was* the main reason I skipped school so often in past years, especially in the spring. To walk through the trees and smell everything new... Unless you’ve experienced it, it can’t be described in mere words.”

“It’s much the same in Ireland. To stand at the base of a hill, where sheep graze and crops grow, and everything is such a brilliant green...”

“I can walk to the top of one particular slope, sit and watch the horses in the pasture all day. The mares with their foals...”

As Mustang continued, Rachel calmed and soon dozed. The younger girl returned to her room, passing Peter carrying a steaming mug along the hall.

“You’re not going back to bed?” wondered the teen.

“I’ll be up ‘til sunrise, making sure we can defend ourselves when the time comes.”

Mustang paused mid-stride. “What do you think will happen?”

“Kristi’s mind is not difficult to penetrate,” he chuckled. “She probably called the ATF as soon as she read Bryan’s will. Most likely, once his casket is lowered into its grave, we’ll have a hundred rifles pointed at us.”

“Not if the metal’s boiling hot.”

“Mustang, I don’t think your parents would want you involved...”

“I don’t care what my parents want!” she snapped. “You saw how they treat me! Even before I... inherited these powers, they didn’t try to understand me. And I sure don’t understand them. I can tell you’ve been a better father to Rachel than mine’s been to me. It’s worth any amount of trouble to preserve the relationship you two have. Besides, whatever does happen, no one except you, me and Rachel will know the source. If you promise to keep my secret, I’ll keep yours.”

O’Donnell extended his right hand. “Deal.”

Mustang clasped the slender fingers. “Good night, then.”

She knew, however, she wouldn’t sleep any more that night, facing the possibility of repeating the scene six weeks earlier, near the hilltop altar at

Boleskine House, when the FBI recruits tried to rush her after she'd sent agent Ben Espinoza flying into Loch Ness.

She'd killed Jack Parsons unintentionally. Could she bring harm to another human being on purpose?

A crucial question, usually faced by police officers or soldiers, not a high school student.

Yet, her answer - in the affirmative - both terrified and thrilled her. She would do whatever required to defend her relatives, without a second thought or any regrets.

III

The mid-morning drive to Balint's Mortuary passed in tense silence, augmented by the gloom of thick and threatening snow clouds overhead. Rachel's eyes were swollen and red, not from grief but from copious weeping. Neither Peter nor Mustang had closed an eye after the disturbing revelation, and both appeared worn and frazzled, despite their dress attire.

Mustang felt decidedly uncomfortable wearing a beige satin blouse and tan corduroy slacks. She was far more accustomed to blue jeans, sweatshirts and an insulated jacket at this time of year. It didn't matter to her everyone else was similarly dressed - impressing others with clothes had never been a consideration for her.

The funeral chapel had been reconfigured overnight, with rows of padded chairs turned to face the casket and a temporary pulpit. Most of the seats were filled when the trio arrived, but Rachel's place had been saved in the front on the aisle - far from Kristi - and two spots in the second row for Peter and Mustang, beside her parents.

Speakers hidden behind faux-Doric columns played a recorded organ prelude, fading as the minister processed from the back of the room to the pulpit. Mustang stole a glance at Peter, who obviously shared her sentiments about such proceedings.

The contrast between the two men, though, brought a smirk to the teen's lips. O'Donnell, spare and blond, might have played basketball in his day - had he grown up in America - while the minister would have been a key defender on his college's football squad. Sturdy and square, any athletic aspirations would have died long since, given the white fringe encircling his head, the bushy eyebrows arched in a stern frown, and the sagging jowls. Yet, once he might have been handsome. Something about the resonance of his voice belied his advanced age.

Something about the scripture readings made her cringe anew. How many times Mustang had listened to “I am the Resurrection and the Life,” and it meant nothing to her. If a person had to wait until they cast off their physical shell to really live, why were they born at all?

The eulogy was a canned attempt to make Bryan Duryea sound like an upstanding, caring husband and father, innovative businessman and community leader. Knowing a bare minimum of facts, Mustang discounted the sermon as the minister’s futile effort to sound as if he’d personally been acquainted with the deceased.

What might have been a bearable 30 minutes expanded to two hours, given the parade of cars following the hearse to the cemetery, and even more religious observances. Kristi rode in the black limousine alone, Rachel refusing to accompany her step-mother. She climbed into the Mercedes with Peter and Mustang, joining the convoy at the very end.

“Can’t we turn down a side street and go home?” the young woman pleaded.

Peter countered, “The sooner we do that, the sooner the trouble starts.”

“Huh?”

“Didn’t you see the government plates on that cluster of Chevys parked at the back of the lot? The ATF already has you under surveillance; they’re waiting for the funeral to conclude before they take you into custody.”

“You’re kidding!”

Mustang interjected, “I could give them all flat tires.”

“That would only delay the inevitable,” said Peter. “We need a solid strategy.”

“I opt for a solid fist up side of Kristi’s face.”

“You will learn, Mustang, violence solves nothing. You could undoubtedly devastate the planet if you chose, but would it really serve any useful purpose?”

She lowered her head. “No.”

“If you decide to use these accidental gifts, do it consciously, and in a positive way.”

“There’s no positive way to deal with people who won’t listen, and won’t back down,” Mustang objected. “I know, from experience. The FBI wanted to arrest me, and I had no choice...”

“There are always choices.”

Rachel muttered, “I agree with Mustang. If I could, I’d plow them down like a field of corn.”

“Oh, to be so young and foolish!” Peter sighed, steering the Mercedes through the arched cemetery entrance.

Beneath a green canopy, the immediate family gathered more for warmth, possibly, than for a good view of the flower-draped casket. The minister, in his white surplice and stole - putting his exact denomination in question - rambled on about ashes and dust, but kept raising his eyes from his prayer book to stare at Mustang.

“Do you think he knows?” she whispered to Peter.

“He’s probably sensing the ghosts in the place; there are a startling crowd of them nearby.”

The girl bit back her laughter. “It’d be hilarious to have them dump him in the hole...”

“Don’t,” directed Peter sternly.

“Killjoy.”

“And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest,” concluded the minister, to which the crowd replied, “Amen.”

Except Mustang, who recognized the phrase as no biblical passage, but the final line of *Hamlet*, studied *ad infinitum* in her sophomore English class.

Little by little, the mourners returned to their vehicles, a staunch few braving increasing winds to offer their final thoughts to Kristi. Rachel, Peter and Mustang hovered at the foot of the casket, contemplating options.

“Are you doing this?” queried O’Donnell.

Mustang retorted, “Doing what?”

“The wind.”

“No reason.”

“Good.”

With a last, withering glance at the trio, Kristi departed. Rachel finally approached the oblong wooden box, suspended on a rack above the grave. She knelt beside it, placing both hands on the lid above where Bryan’s head would have lain.

“Good-bye, Daddy,” she murmured. “Whatever happens next, I’ll try to do you proud.”

No more had the three descended the hill to their car, than a pair of grounds keepers appeared from nowhere to finish the job.

Rachel didn’t look back. The activities ahead distracted her from any grief.

Ten officials wearing ATF vests and carrying automatic rifles were dispersing to create a cordon, from which there would be no escape.

“What now?” she puzzled.

Despising the use of unnecessary force - common with government agencies - Mustang took charge. "Get in the car."

"Huh?"

"Get in. Peter, get us out of here."

He protested. "There's no way. We'll end up looking like Swiss cheese."

"Not if we're bullet-proof."

"But..."

"*Get in the car!*" she ordered, as the men poised their weapons.

Her companions rapidly complied. Audible through the glass, a bullhorn-enhanced voice yelled, "Halt!" Peter started the engine, and shifted into gear.

Repeated instructions vibrated the windows, but Mustang countermanded them.

"Go!"

"You're crazy, y'know?" Peter shouted above the din.

"You're not the first person who's told me that!"

The Mercedes shot forward, and the ATF reacted automatically. A hail of gunfire rained on the vehicle, but not one projectile penetrated the metal.

"In 24 hours, every one of those idiots will regret this," Mustang swore.

"How so?" asked Rachel.

"When they don't find the trap door leading to a stash of illegal liquor at your dad's house, they'll have a lot of explaining to do."

Peter chuckled as the car sped along the country road. "Now, that's what I call using your power in a positive way! You cause them no harm, but their own stupidity brings with it consequences befitting the situation!"

To that, both girls chorused, "Amen!"

There were severe consequences to resisting arrest, however, which they discovered upon turning along the drive leading to the 13,000 square foot Duryea home. A platoon of armed figures rushed the car, forcing Peter to slam on the brakes, narrowly avoiding a collision. The sergeant in charge waved his pistol threateningly, signaling the driver to unlock the doors. No more did the knobs pop upward, than all four panels were jerked open, and the innocent suspects yanked into the chill air.

"You'll be sorry," remarked Mustang, as muscular arms propelled her toward the house.

"You're the one who'll be sorry, when you're sentenced to 20 years in prison," the gruff baritone growled.

Not one to stomach rough treatment, the teen planted her feet and spun toward O'Donnell. "Peter, what would you consider positive action in a predicament like this?"

Ignoring the thick mass of flesh wrapped around his neck in a near strangle-hold, he deliberated carefully. "I've never seen a stampede."

Mustang shot at Rachel, bent double beneath the pressure of another officer's grip so her brunette locks touched the ground, "Any farms nearby?"

"The neighbors up the road have 500 head of dairy beef grazing in pastures bordering Dad's land."

"Fences?"

"Split rail."

"No barbed wire?"

"No," Rachel confirmed, grunting when her wrist was twisted.

Kristi emerged from the house as a faint rumbling reached their ears. The black Scottish terrier accompanied her, on a gold filigree leash, shrilly barking. The widow's perfectly made-up countenance - undoubtedly augmented by cosmetic surgery - glowed with triumph. "You've been a naughty girl, my dear," she gloated. "What would your father say if he'd known about the untaxed liquor in the cellar?"

"He knew about it, and so did you," huffed her step-daughter. "I was five thousand miles away, so how could I be responsible?"

There was no chance to respond, as the faint hoof beats grew to noise and tremors of earthquake proportions. The ATF squad inadvertently eased the hold on their prisoners, searching the horizon for the clamor's origins. When the herd topped the hill at a dead run, terror claimed the men's faces.

"What the devil..." cried one.

"No devil, just cows," Mustang grinned, slipping free of her captor. "And, if you want to survive, drop your guns and back away with your hands raised."

The sergeant poked her in the chest with his pistol. "There's no way you could have caused this!"

"You want to bet your life on that?" she replied conspiratorially.

Her tone was enough to convince him, along with the ever-increasing proximity of countless raging bovines. "All right, all right!" he conceded, placing his sidearm on the ground and commanding his subordinates to do likewise. Within seconds, the men had retreated twenty yards, leaving Rachel, Peter and Mustang to confront Kristi.

"What's the big idea?" screeched the latter.

Rachel answered, "I could ask you the same."

"Now, now, cousin," Mustang chuckled. "We'll let her take these conscientious gentlemen to the garage soon enough, but we won't be their prisoners when they do."

Directly in the path of the stampede, Peter tugged Mustang's sleeve.
"Aren't you forgetting something?"

"Don't you trust me?"

"I don't trust *them*."

"My sisters!" Mustang hailed the cattle. "I appreciate your quick response to my summons. All is well, and you may go home, with my thanks."

Had a concrete barrier been erected before them, the mottled beasts would have swerved no more abruptly. Panting and tired, they slowly plodded back up the hill toward their owner's property.

The ATF sergeant's eyes widened in astonishment. "You *are* a devil!"

"The only horns were on the cows," Mustang chided. "Come on, now, but the rest of your men stay here."

Saucily, Kristi led the way to the three-stall garage, activating remote-control doors with a key-fob extracted from her skirt pocket. She strode to the far corner and reached into the tool cabinet. Her fingers closed around an empty whiskey bottle, rather than a hidden lever.

"You disconnected it!" she accused Rachel, peering into the otherwise empty cabinet.

Peter, Mustang and Rachel feigned ignorance.

Kristi abandoned the search for the trap door's trigger, and began groping on the floor for the edge of the hatch. The concrete presented one solid, smooth slab. "There was a trap door here, not three days ago!"

"Mrs. Duryea," said the sergeant, "you may be overcome with grief at losing your husband, and you only thought there was a trap door..."

"Don't patronize me, stupid! Bryan was down in the cellar almost daily, counting the inventory and arranging for shipments! It couldn't just disappear!"

"You're right, there. No secret entrance could be sealed shut without leaving some evidence of a seam in the floor."

Kristi caught the underlying meaning. "You're not going to pursue this?"

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but we have real criminals to arrest. I will tell you this, though, my supervisor may be in touch with you, to discuss a possible charge of false reporting..."

Coming totally unhinged, Kristi leapt at the man and beat her fists on his chest. "You can't do this! I tell you, there's thousands of dollars in liquor down there! You've got to break through the floor and confiscate it for evidence!"

Peter chimed in, "Yes, officer, she's telling the truth. In fact, Kristi, why don't you have the sergeant take his men around to the secret delivery door, out in the old garden shed?"

Kristi ceased her attack, chest heaving. “That’s right! There was another door... Come on!”

“I’m sorry, ma’am. We’ve got to be in San Francisco by tonight, for a really important raid.” He nodded to the others in turn. “I apologize to you folks, too. I hate nothing more than mistreating innocent bystanders.”

The sergeant directed his men to retrieve their weapons, and head out in their black Chevys. A sense of vulnerability penetrated Kristi’s anger, and she rushed to her Porsche convertible, giving chase to the government vehicles. Pouring onto the road into Boise, the convoy nearly ran a silver BMW into a tree.

Rachel, Mustang and Peter paused in their trek to the house when the expensive coupe eased under the portico. They were stunned when the elderly minister alighted from behind the wheel.

“What can I do for you, Reverend?” ventured Peter, suspicious.

“It’s more a matter of what I can do for you, sir. I came to offer whatever solace I can to the family in this time of grief.”

“A kind gesture, but thank you, no. We’ll find our own comfort in our own way.”

With that, Peter opened the double walnut doors and ushered Rachel across the threshold. Mustang lingered on the step, however, eyeing the classic auto uneasily.

“Are you all right, young lady?” its owner inquired.

“You aren’t a typical man of the cloth.”

“I suppose not.”

“You quoted Shakespeare during the funeral service.”

“That’s right.”

“No one found it unusual.”

“Except you.”

“Is that why you kept staring at me, graveside?”

“I have no doubt your red hair attracts attention wherever you go.”

As old as he was, he had a comeback for everything, which impressed Mustang. “It’s a curse more than a blessing, for sure.” She reached for the gold door knob, offering one last jab. “You know, to drive that thing, you should be thirty years younger.”

Guilty fingers clamped over her mouth, too late. Her scream rent the air when the minister’s face began melting.

IV

Panicked hands clawed at clumps of skin dripping off his skull. Peter burst through the door, having heard Mustang's cry, in time to see the minister's scalp and white hair slide down his back.

"What have you done?" bellowed O'Donnell.

The teen whimpered, "I think I've killed him!"

Peter dashed around the BMV, intent on making the minister comfortable, at least, if these were his last moments. When he seized the elderly man's shoulders, though, an odd substance coated his palms. He raised sticky fingers to his nose and sniffed, then recoiled and squinted at the mangled face.

"This is latex," he declared.

Rachel, on the doorstep, repeated, "Latex?"

"Used in film and on stage to completely transform an actor's face."

Reaching up, Peter plucked a drooping eyebrow from the minister's cheek.

Blue eyes met grey-green orbs, and a smile played on the minister's taut lips. "Hello, Peter."

"I thought I recognized that voice!" proclaimed O'Donnell, playfully rubbing the man's suddenly exposed mop of auburn-tinted bronze waves.

"Thomas Burton, you bastard!"

The two embraced heartily, old friends reunited. Once they separated, the exchange continued.

"What are you doing here, in that get-up?"

"I've been living here for nearly two years," Burton replied.

"In the States?"

"In Boise."

"What? And you never let me know?"

"It wasn't public knowledge, so why would I tell a reporter?"

Peter snorted. "I'm not a reporter any more. You know that."

"Still, for a nice bit of change, you might sell a juicy bit of gossip to your fellows on the Dublin rags."

They turned to the girls. "Rachel, Mustang, say hello to Thomas Burton, a very dear friend, and the best actor Ireland ever produced."

Burton punched Peter's arm. "How many times do I have to remind you, Peter. I'm Welsh."

"Born in Wales, perhaps, but nurtured in the bosom of Eire from your first uttering of Hamlet's soliloquy on the boards."

“As you wish.” He approached Rachel. “You’ve grown up quite the lovely woman, my dear.”

When Burton kissed her hand, she crinkled her nose. “It’s been a long time.”

He next clamped Mustang’s fingers between his. “And Mustang, the perceptive one. So few Americans - much less students - appreciate the Bard these days. I’ve been disappointed how the great works are neglected.”

She stammered, “I’m sorry... about this.”

“I don’t care, really. I’m glad to have it off, though quite a magician’s trick it was, I must say.”

“But, why the make-up, Thomas?” Peter urged.

“It was meant as a joke, albeit in poor taste. When Bryan passed, no minister in these parts would preside at the funeral, given his... profession, and that the family weren’t regular church-goers. So, Kristi and I...”

“Kristi!” exclaimed Rachel.

O’Donnell precluded any further outbursts. “Inside with you, and we’ll have a drink.”

The men stepped past the girls into the entrance hall. Rachel and Mustang followed to the cozy study, some distance behind them.

“Watch out for that one,” Rachel cautioned quietly.

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve read Peter’s scrapbooks of articles. He wrote a lot about Thomas Burton when he covered the theatre beat. Even had him narrate a couple of the documentaries filmed in the 90s. He’s an unqualified genius on stage, receiving some of the most auspicious reviews in history. Conversely, he’s a notorious drinker and womanizer. He has a violent streak, supposedly, and beat his fifth wife so viciously, her recuperation took ten weeks in hospital.”

The subject of their discussion must’ve overheard, for he suddenly filled the doorway, madness smoldering in his eyes. “What fools deem genius is both a talent and a taint,” he rumbled. “I am known to destroy everything I touch.”

“And to be far too melodramatic,” chuckled Peter, passing his friend a tumbler of whiskey. “Come, sit.”

No better way, perhaps, to spend an evening than listening to two Celtic-blooded men spin stories. Whiskey flowed freely between them. The girls satisfied themselves with sodas, eventually progressing to the kitchen, a dinner of pork chops, asparagus and mashed potatoes cooked. Burton ran upstairs to shower and don a pair of Peter’s blue linen pajamas until his latex-stained suit could be cleaned and pressed.

The study, fire blazing on the grate, made a fine place to enjoy a slice of key lime pie - not home-made, but still delicious. Well past midnight, Rachel noticed Peter's eyelids drooping. Burton, hair tousled and definitely relaxed, reclined in an armchair, a half-full bottle in one hand, shot glass in the other. Two empty quarts lay beside his feet. She waved Mustang toward the stairs.

"They're done," she remarked.

Her cousin agreed. "Bombed."

"Too bad, really. If Mr. Burton wasn't having an affair with Kristi, I might actually like him." They trudged up the curved staircase.

"What did he say that gave you the impression..."

"I've known about it since I came home. Dad knew, too, but couldn't fight for her, being so ill. Kristi being a very demanding sort, she wants the best of everything - material and... sexual. When Dad could no longer... well, you know, she met Mr. Burton at a special performance of *Julius Caesar* for charity in Seattle."

"What was he - or she, for that matter - doing in Seattle?"

"Burton was on tour with a repertory company. He'd been banned from the Irish stage, according to what I read, for his scandalous conduct. Kristi attended, representing Dad, who tried to maintain a public reputation for being a philanthropist. She delivered their check for \$500,000 to the chair of the organization, and..."

"That must've hurt Bryan terribly."

"It didn't help his recovery. He stopped taking chemo and radiation, and basically languished away. It comforts me knowing Kristi will get a hefty dose of pain when Mr. Burton cheats on her."

"You really think..."

"It's rumored he'll chase anything with bosoms."

"I'm safe, then."

"Why?"

Mustang pulled the satin blouse outward, and peered down her front. "I haven't got much in that department."

The pair giggled, parting ways on the landing.

"No bad dreams tonight!" Mustang advised.

"I hope not!"

The teen didn't bother to switch on the light in her room, sinking on the bed, relieved the day was over. She realized her parents were most likely back in Montana by now. They hadn't even said good-bye.

Reaching down, fingertips felt only nylon around her foot. She uttered a curse, the memory of kicking off the stiff loafers before dinner resurrected through a fog of weariness.

The idea of making the shoes walk upstairs by themselves made her snicker. She could visualize O'Donnell and Burton watching the animated footwear through a drunken haze...

No. Better to fetch them and be done.

She crept from the bedroom, glad the marble steps didn't creak as she descended. The huge house enveloped in silence, she recalled Peter's mention of ghosts in the cemetery. It would not have surprised her to see a robust spectre of Bryan Duryea trodding the halls of the dwelling he'd paid to have built.

A different sort of surprise awaited her.

One lone table lamp burned in the study, just enough illumination for Mustang to find her way around the furniture. Stretched on the sofa, Peter snored softly. As she moved past the matching armchair, she was startled by the voice of Thomas Burton.

"You're still up?"

She gasped. "I... forgot my shoes."

He gazed fondly at O'Donnell. "There was a time when he and I could match shot for shot, all through the long and tortuous nights. Marriage ruined him."

"Marriage ruins a lot of things, from what I've heard."

She bent to retrieve her loafers and, when she straightened, he stood behind her. The heat of him burned through his borrowed pajamas and her blouse, scorching her skin. One arm slid around her waist, while his other hand brushed long tresses off her shoulders. His liquor-soaked lips set her neck afire.

"Mr. Burton, please stop."

"Thomas. I'll not heed your protestations until you beg me by name."

"Thomas, please."

Between kisses, he asserted, "I'll not heed your protestations at all, I fear. I find you more intoxicating than the most potent whiskey. No Juliet, no Desdemona equals your beauty. You are like a diamond, every facet brilliant in the sunlight."

"Thomas, I..." Given the rush of fresh emotions pulsing in her veins, Mustang silently forgave Kristi for having an affair. The yearning to feel like this on a constant basis was perfectly understandable.

"Have you ever been with a man?"

"No."

“Sweet 16 and never been kissed?”

“True.”

“Then, let me be the first, my fiery nymph.” He twirled her so their eyes met. Not as tall as Peter, he still towered above her, and lowered his head to assault her mouth with unbridled passion.

The floor began to shudder violently. Framed pictures dropped off the walls, and bric-a-brac crashed from the mantle. Beyond the French doors, lightning and thunder tore across an inky sky.

Suddenly, Peter ripped the pair apart. “What on earth are you doing?”

At the same instant, the natural phenomena subsided.

Burton smiled through deep breaths. “Peter, if she’s yours, I apologize. I couldn’t resist...”

“Not you, Thomas. Her.” He grasped Mustang by the arms and shook her. “Do you want to bring the roof down on our heads?”

“I... didn’t do anything,” the girl moaned.

Peter looked at his unsteady friend. “Be thankful he won’t remember any of this in the morning.”

“Why not?”

“Imagine the uproar he could cause with knowledge of your power! After a binge like this, though, he never remembers anything. Help me get him to the couch.”

They led Thomas to the spot Peter had, only moments before, occupied. A pillow under his head, eyelids fluttered shut. O’Donnell then guided Mustang from the study. “Off to bed, now.”

“What about you?”

“Somebody needs to make sure he doesn’t roam these unfamiliar rooms half-awake and hurt himself.”

“What?”

“When he’s drunk, he walks in his sleep. Don’t worry. I’ve kept vigil over him many a night. There was a time when he and I could match shot for shot, but he never could comprehend the concept of moderation.”

Mustang wished she could moderate her internal clock to stop rousing her at six A.M., the regular time for feeding and watering the horses on her father’s ranch. Plodding down to the kitchen, she found Thomas - still wearing Peter’s pajamas - straddling a stool at the island, sipping a cup of coffee. His posture and demeanor gave no indication of a hangover.

“Why are you up so early?” she queried.

“I had a most disturbing dream.”

She poured herself a glass of orange juice from the refrigerator. “Really?”
“Indeed. I was in the wilderness, beset by jarring earthquakes and violent thunderstorms. There seemed no hope for survival, except to cling to you.”

“Oh, hell...” Mustang nearly choked on her drink.

Thomas abandoned his seat, drawing near to her. “Are you upset by the vivid imagery, or because you are attracted to me?”

“To be honest, I’m perplexed by the workings of the human subconscious,” she groaned, sidestepping both the question and the man.

Her pursued the point and the girl. “What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“Peter swore you’d forget.”

“Forget what?” He pinned her against the granite counter. “Does he believe, since I imbibed more than a fair share of good Irish whiskey last night, I don’t know what happened?”

“You can’t tell me in so many words but, deep down, part of you remembers.”

“And that frightens you? Why?”

She lowered her eyes.

A gentle hand raised her chin once more. “This frightens you?” His kissed her tenderly. “I’ve wanted to do that since I saw you at the funeral. In fact, that’s why I drove out here yesterday. I planned to ask you to come away with me, back to Ireland.”

Her jaw dropped. “I had no idea you’d suggest such a thing!”

“But, I did.” O’Donnell, framed in the doorway, did not look pleased.
“Mustang, go back to bed.”

“Peter, old friend, you’re not the girl’s father,” objected Thomas.

“No, but you’re old enough to be. And her father trusts me to protect her during her visit.”

Mustang squeezed free of Burton’s trap. “I *can* protect myself, you know.”

“Do you want to take that risk?”

“There is no risk,” the actor stated. “I would shower her with the finest jewels, enshrine her in a luxurious mansion...”

“Until you grew bored with her, like you must be bored with Kristi,” surmised Peter. “Still, I refer to a different sort of risk. Not to her, but to you.”

“You make it sound like she would be the death of me!”

Peter shrugged noncommittally.

Burton shifted his gaze from his friend to Mustang. “What is it he refuses to divulge?”

“Mustang, think about your future!” Peter warned. “Do you want to spend the rest of your days in hiding, scorned and reviled by the world?”

“You know the truth; why shouldn’t he?” demanded the girl.

“I know your secret, and you know mine. Just as we both know Rachel’s, and she knows ours - we are mutually in danger, and mutually safe. All Thomas’ secrets were made public long ago, so he’d have no reason to keep silent.”

Burton scoffed, “You hold me in such low esteem?”

“You are what you are, and it’s time for you to go.”

Thomas plucked Mustang’s hand to his lips. “I understand none of this, but I trust Peter’s insights. He’s always been... forthright with me. Farewell, my dear.”

Though he remained in the house another hour, showering and dressing, Mustang saw him no more. She sat in the kitchen, watching the sun rise, renewed anger at Jack Parsons eating away her soul.

Rachel joined her there. “When I opened my eyes this morning, a shaft of light peeked through the curtains, creating a horse-shaped glimmer on the wall. I had a vision of you galloping on a fine mount through the wood, without a care in the world. Before that can happen, though, there will be many fences to jump, and ruts in the path. What other people call happiness will never be yours, cousin.”

“I think I already know that,” Mustang acknowledged.

“You will touch many lives, and be touched my many, as well. That, at least, may be some comfort to you.”

“Thanks.”

“You feel older than your years right now, correct?”

“Correct.”

“You’re more than welcome to come to Ireland with us, once the house sale is completed. A body can find peace there...”

Mustang perked up. “House sale? The house has been sold?”

“Before he left, Mr. Burton told Peter he wishes to buy the house for Kristi. We won’t get as much as we would if we put it on the market, but to get full price might take months. We’ll have the check in hand before the end of the day.”

“Strange man.”

“He is, indeed.”

The teen rose. “I’ll be upstairs, packing.”

The Mercedes departed the house with its three passengers early the next morning. The six-hour drive to Montana passed uneventfully, occasional snow showers slowing their progress along the highway. In a weird sort of way,

Mustang was glad when the ranch house came into sight along the narrow country road.

To prevent any unpleasant confrontation with the Duryeas, O'Donnell parked near the bunk house. He pulled Mustang's suitcase from the trunk while the two girls embraced. Placing the luggage beside her, he took her in his arms.

"Rachel is so lucky to have a father like you," remarked the girl. "I've learned more about life in the past few days than my parents have ever taught me."

"My affection for you is very unfatherly," Peter whispered, kissing her lightly on the lips. "I'm not as bold as Thomas, but we're cut from the same cloth, in many ways. Where he is attracted by physical beauty, it is the potential to be great which draws me. You have both. If I were twenty years younger..."

"You're not wearing latex make-up," chuckled the teen. "I'd hate to see what would happen if I repeated *that* phrase."

"Just remember, use your gift in positive ways."

"I'll try."

She watched from the bunk house steps as the car disappeared in a flurry of snow flakes. Then, she walked to the front door and stepped inside the warm living room. Joe sat at the kitchen table, eating lunch. Maggie had her hands in a sink full of dishes.

They never even asked about the trip.