

The Mustang Chronicles:

Double Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

The affliction termed “senioritis” - well known to high school teachers and even college professors - may not be included in any medical encyclopedia, but the annual epidemic disrupts classes and threatens many students’ academic standing.

Elizabeth “Mustang” Duryea found herself in the grips of senioritis prior to spring break. She’d reached the point by mid-March where she couldn’t crack open a textbook without getting a headache, and longing to wander the woods of her father’s ranch.

She’d behaved all year, catching the bus each morning and resisting the temptation to skip her less favorite periods. A history of frequent absences - including both semesters as a junior - left her unaccustomed to the five-day-a-week grind, and nurtured an abiding hatred for the entire Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High School campus.

Her discomfort had increased in recent weeks due to renewed burns on her palms, and she couldn’t fathom how she’d aggravated the injuries. The normal cause - if such a thing could be deemed normal - involved a lightning bolt propelling her through space, thanks to the power passed to her by occultist Jack Parsons. Her last journey had been the previous autumn, to the Cleveland Clinic.

The last she remembered, anyway.

The potential to forget such an adventure knotted her stomach, and her mother’s daily comments about the girl’s need to eat more tightened the knots. When not helping tend the horses in the north and western pastures, Mustang confined herself to her room, forcing herself to study and not think about the disasters she’d caused over the course of eighteen months.

Her impulsiveness had been responsible for a series of horrendous mishaps. In the process of “mopping up” the messy aftermath of her inadvertent statements, she usually ended up spilling the dirty water again and again.

She’d all but dismissed Wilfrid Bailey, aka Jonas Fairchild, from her memory. The imposter biology teacher, who’d turned out to be a psychotic murderer, had held her hostage the previous winter. He’d later drugged her and surrendered her to the FBI in an effort to reduce his own prison sentence. The last newspaper article she’d read on his trial confirmed agent Ben Espinoza’s prediction the former orthopedic surgeon would never see the light of day without the distortion of iron bars.

Why, then, had she dreamed about him towering over her bed, a twisted sneer contorting his features, three nights in a row - so reminiscent of her

nightmare when he escaped from custody while being extradited from Nevada to Montana?

And spent her days sneaking peeks over her shoulder along the school corridors, fearing he might step from one of the classrooms in pursuit of her?

What hazy recollections refused to congeal into solid images inside her skull?

Lyndon Bixby's raging red eyes glared at her from beyond the grave; she'd preferred his sideways grin. Francis of Assisi's gentle voice pierced the teen's angst, reminding her of peaceful days in Italy, echoed by Peter O'Donnell's advice to use her power in positive ways.

So much for good intentions, she sighed, punching her pillow.

Kiyoshi Shimoto, master samurai swordsmith, gazed kindly from the afterlife, his wise words nestled in a corner of her heart, and lived by his grandson, Rick, until his tragic death. Why couldn't she enjoy the contentment she'd seen in that elder's eyes, even when the searing heat of the forge singed his skin? Gandhi's unexpected appearance in the family bathroom still made her chuckle...

Except when she felt nauseous, like now.

"This is too much for a kid my age," she addressed the midnight moon beams making a thin layer of snow sparkle on the lawn beyond her window. "If I can command the elements to give me enough strength to lift an airplane, then I should have enough personal strength of will to not use these powers anymore."

Another well meant promise destined to be broken.

The strain of analyzing every word spoken to her - by her parents, teachers or classmates - and her reactions, increased the torment coursing through her body like the very blood which kept her alive. Had she been a champagne bottle, her cork would have long since popped.

Her parents had suggested psychological counseling, primarily when her power manifested in ways even they couldn't ignore. Mustang wanted nothing more than to talk with someone who could understand her dilemma, but not at \$200 per hour. She had no friends, and the younger ranch hands were still on their winter vacation...

Only her cousin Rachel, with her visions, had grasped the difficulties of life with these unusual gifts, and she was thousands of miles away in Ireland.

Things came to a head the following Thursday, during a mandatory "Drug Free School" assembly. More like a pep rally prior to a football game, six grades of students - seventh through twelfth - crammed the gymnasium bleachers, doing the stomp-stomp-clap to Queen's *We Will Rock You*. Mustang sat in their midst, the only one not standing, perhaps. Her body shook with irrepressible sobs, and

tears streamed down her face, hidden from view only by her long auburn tresses. She wondered if nervous breakdowns started this way - a sudden onslaught of emotion. Having never witnessed such an event first hand, she could only guess, based on what she'd been told.

Her churning emotions sparked an outward manifestation, beyond the girl's concerns for her mental well-being. Like the earthquake spawned when she kissed Thomas Burton that first time after cousin Bryan's funeral in Boise - not the only time, though, a niggling sensation indicated, which confused her more - the ground shifted violently, wooden bleachers buckled and split. Enthusiastic cheering from nearby students escalated to terrified screams in seconds.

Panic spread rapidly through the crowd. A mass exodus off the graduated risers commenced, with many students tripping on the boards and falling to floor level, where they were trampled by frightened peers. Two huge stereo speakers were toppled in the rush for the doors, and electrical lines broke loose, showering sparks in all directions.

Still, Mustang couldn't stop weeping.

The fact she hadn't cried since her father spanked her for accidentally leaving the corral gate unlatched, allowing two prize palominos to escape - an innocent mistake for a six-year-old - must've played into the intensity of the outburst. The building had been entirely evacuated before her shoulders stopped shaking, she was able to dry her eyes on her flannel shirt sleeve, and scrutinize the disaster area.

Paramedics and teachers assisted the wounded; janitors hurried to secure crackling black cords snaking across the basketball court. Radiating from the spot where she sat on the fifth level, a veritable spider web of destruction extended up the walls and deep into the structure's foundation.

The worst damage to date.

"Duryea, you hurt?"

For the principal to know her on sight depressed the girl further. He stood at the base of the mangled bleachers, glowering up at her.

"I'm okay," she replied.

"My office. Now."

She rose, unsteady with the shifting of twisted metal supports beneath the wood. "Oh, hell..."

A million dollars would have been cheap for a pair of ear plugs to block the half-hour tirade which followed in the cramped, windowless chamber. And it had nothing to do with Mustang being accused of initiating the devastation in the gym. The principal made it abundantly clear, over and over, that her failure to

abide by the earthquake evacuation order endangered not only herself, but the emergency personnel who might have been required to search for her.

“Irresponsible, that’s what it is,” he concluded, snatching up the phone.

“Who are you calling?”

“Your parents.”

“What, you’re suspending me?”

“Why bother? The school will be closed for the next month so architects and masons can assess whether the foundation is sound and the students can safely return.”

Mustang raised herself from the unbalanced, molded plastic chair. “The foundation *is* sound,” she declared. “No one needs to worry about the walls collapsing or the floors buckling. Any kid hurt will be okay by tonight.”

The principal glared at this youngster, astonished by her boldness. He opened his mouth to speak; she didn’t give him the chance, leaving the room and heading outside for a breath of fresh, albeit freezing, air.

She’d never really watched how nature obeyed her directives, destroying one second, healing another. On this occasion, the microburst of wind which blasted through the high school’s main entrance slammed her against the bulkhead, leaving her unable to move. All she could do is gaze through the open gym doors at the wonders within.

Spontaneous shafts of fire and streams of water from an overhead sprinkler system cooperatively softened the mortar holding high walls upright, while the wind eased slanted concrete blocks back to their original positions. The very earth beneath her feet jolted decisively, restoring the foundation and waxed sporting surface, with its red and black lion painted at center-court. The bleachers mended as if the wood were melting into pulp and forming anew.

By the time the principal emerged from the administrative suite, the repairs were complete. His eyes widened in terror; Mustang simply grinned.

“Was this just a nightmare?” he gasped.

“No, it’s my life.”

The last bus idled at the curb beyond the glass doors; Mustang rushed to catch it. She didn’t care if it took her home, or the other side of the county. Just to get away from this hell...

“Damn you, Jack Parsons.”

The teen knew in her heart she could never escape the hell of her own existence. Leaning her head against the frosty bus window, she debated ways to end the constant torture of having to control herself. The need to suppress anguished tears or romantic passion, never get angry or direct a sarcastic insult at

anyone - "Go jump in the lake" became all too real, as FBI instructor Ben Espinoza knew all too well - for fear of nature's tangible empathy with her emotions... she'd be out of her mind before she turned 20!

The people who'd seen what transpired when she opened her mouth, from torching a tree to preventing a man from falling and breaking his leg, traveling to Japan in an instant or bringing the spirits of those long deceased into present day - she didn't like the phrase "raising the dead" - already believed her mad. Hadn't Wilfrid Bailey/Jonas Fairchild warned her she'd eventually reach a state where she didn't even recognize her own reflection in the mirror?

The bus slid on a patch of black ice, rousing her from this morose reverie. She could do - and had done - much good with her power, she had to admit. Be it preventing a private jet from crashing, saving her cousin Rachel from false charges linked to an illegal stash of liquor in the basement of her father's mansion, teaching little Bonnie Thompson and her mother the importance of imagination, or... or... what?

She contemplated the charred flesh on her palms, frustrated. Part of her mind felt blocked by a great, immovable stone. Another symptom of an impending psychological breakdown? she puzzled.

Arriving at the ranch amidst light flurries, Mustang detoured into the barn to feed her pinto, Heartbeat. She knew he needed exercise, but the day had drained her. With a tender stroke of his nose, she tramped toward the house.

Her mother greeted her while peeling potatoes at the kitchen counter. "The news reported a 5.2 earthquake north of here. Did you feel it at the school?"

The irony of her parents' continued ignorance - or blindness - about her power raised a wry laugh in the teen's throat. She so wanted to shake the middle-aged woman by the shoulders and yell, "Wake up, already!"

Instead, she projected a calm facade. "Did you feel it out here?"

"Just a bit. Better get washed up, your dad will be coming in soon."

"So early? It's not even five."

"He has a meeting in town tonight."

"What kind of meeting?"

"A group of ranchers is thinking about forming an anti-terrorist coalition, to protect their stock and property from attacks."

Mustang nearly choked upon hearing this. "What kind of terrorist would attack in this forsaken part of the world?"

"The thinking is: with all the strange weather, violent deaths and unprovoked fights, someone might be systematically introducing poison into the

water supply, detonating explosives underground, or something equally horrendous.”

The girl knew Maggie had memorized that language straight from a newspaper article or televised report. Such mass hysteria could reach epidemic proportions, she herself the catalyst.

“The only poison around here is me.”

She shut herself in her bedroom, appetite ruined.

The thought of anywhere from five to two dozen armed men - sharing the skewed opinions her father often spouted at the dinner table - roaming the Montana countryside, questioning suspicious strangers or unsavory locals, doling out mob justice when their views were opposed...

“Oh, hell...” moaned the girl, throwing herself face-down on the mattress. “Will it ever stop?”

The agony of guilt consumed her. Over a year and a half, she’d created this predicament. She saw no harm in fine-tuning her affinity with the natural elements, after returning via lightning bolt from Scotland, by setting fire to a few random trees on her father’s property. To extinguish the flames, she summoned brief rain showers, later learning the state’s meteorological service had tracked the anomalies.

That’s how the FBI had located her, once she disappeared from Boleskine House during their annual cadet training. At least, she’d managed to convince them to end their surveillance.

Or, had she? She hadn’t seen Ben Espinoza since... denying him the authentic lightsaber more than a year ago. Would she know if other government agents were monitoring her activities?

What difference if they were?

She desperately wanted to tone down the magnitude of the displays, having little luck - like that very day.

If anyone wound up in hospital because some over-zealous rancher got trigger-happy...

Mustang rolled on her back, staring at the blank ceiling. She could never wander into one of these coalition meetings and beg the men to disband, based on her explanation of the phenomena. She could never live like millions of other high school seniors across America, thrilled by a great play during a football game, or being congratulated for a perfect score on a sociology exam. The situation had no amicable resolution, no “happy ending”.

Half-asleep, she lamented, “It would be so great to have a twin, without my problems and powers, studious and semi-popular in school, who could make

Mom and Dad proud.” Then, she shifted her weight and closed her eyes, feeling ever so much like she was literally being ripped into two separate pieces.

II

The alarm sounded at 6:00 AM, as usual. No light penetrated heavy curtains, but Mustang knew morning had come; chores and school beckoned. Kicking off the quilt, her bare feet touched the worn shag carpet. She stretched and cracked her neck, shuffling blindly to the door. Laying her hand on the knob, other fingers touched hers.

She yelped and recoiled. Another voice yelped. Mustang groped for the wall switch, igniting the ceiling fixture.

Two contralto voices simultaneously gulped, “Oh, hell.”

Without the aid of a mirror, the girl pondered her exact reflection, three-dimensional flesh and bone, standing before her.

Could it get any worse? she groaned inwardly. Me and my big mouth...

Maggie called groggily from the kitchen, “Everything okay, hon?”

“A spider, Mom,” the duplicate Mustang answered quickly.

The original suddenly realized she’d never paid attention to the sound of her own voice, a disconcerting experience. She scrutinized this misconceived twin, noticing the erect posture and natural smile.

“Go to school,” she instructed. “I’m going back to bed.”

“What if Mom finds you?”

“She’ll think she’s going crazy, like when she saw Gandhi creeping around, or Lyndon Bixby’s blood splattered on my shirt and face.”

“You haven’t shown her much love and respect for a long time.”

“However nature created you in response to my stupidity, that doesn’t include being my conscience. Mom hasn’t shown me much of anything, not even how to cook, or offered to help me with my homework. Our relationship is our business.”

“All I’m saying is: it could be better.”

“Then, you fix it.” Mustang flopped on the bed. “Good night.”

No one disturbed Mustang’s extended slumber, believing her to be safely on the school bus. She awoke around 10:00 AM, fully rested - for once - and slipped across to the bathroom to shower and dress. Then, zipped in her parka, she hoisted herself over the bedroom window sill for a leisurely stroll of the snow-blanketed acreage.

This was the life she craved; no stress, none of the minor annoyances which could trigger an unintended tragedy because of her power. She dreamed of a cabin deep in the forest, the simple things. To have deer feed in the yard, rabbits nibbling at the lettuce in a small garden, and birds singing overhead - what better way to savor every moment?

The difficult aspect of this particular situation would be eating. She couldn't just waltz into the kitchen and make a sandwich for herself, if her twin were in the house. That would definitely drive Maggie over the edge and, despite what had been said that morning, she did care about her mother in an untraditional way.

She could travel, if she chose, to whatever country appealed to her. And, she had - as the throbbing wounds on her palms reminded her - within the past few weeks. But, where? She had no symptoms of Alzheimer's or dementia; she was far too young for such ailments. How could she forget the queasy feeling initiated when the lightning tore her from one location and deposited her in another, thousands of miles away?

Her rational side proposed this memory lapse might have occurred for good reason. She wanted to know, and she didn't want to know. She had ignored her curiosity the day Jack Parsons blindfolded her beside the hilltop altar at Boleskine, later discovering she'd thrust a knife in his chest, releasing him from his earthly bonds after nine prolonged decades. Ignorance was *not* bliss, to be sure, yet an excess of knowledge could do far more damage.

The conflict caused its own distinctive internal pain. Ten carefree minutes was all she asked... for now.

Gloveless fingers revolted against the sub-freezing temperatures; her double had taken the only pair to school, evidently. Jamming her hands in the coat's pockets, she trudged toward the western pasture. Three mares would be giving birth soon, and the teen made a habit of checking on them periodically.

Certain days, she surprised herself that she'd never uttered the fateful phrase which would transform her, permanently, into a horse. She loved the animals with every fiber of her being, more than 99.99% of people. Their bearing and behavior, elegance and eccentricities, made them the most noble of beasts. Despite what some believed, they reacted to various stimuli with the same emotions as humans. Mustang looked forward to taking over the ranch after graduation marked her survival of senior year at Canyon Creek. Besides the ranch hands, no other biped would be allowed within the fences.

The mares allowed her to pat their heads and place a gentle hand on their bellies; the girl felt movement of the foals *in utero*. She'd learned the facts of life

watching the annual show in the corral, supervised by her father and, in emergencies, the local veterinarian. The only pregnant women she'd ever seen, for that matter, were in movies and on television.

Mustang knew, given her temperament and her powers, she'd never have children of her own. Her infrequent dealings with youngsters - when school field trips brought them to the ranch each spring - utterly annoyed her. No way could she spend 18 years, minimum, tolerating the cries, screams and infantile antics of the brats.

Headed home, she glimpsed the yellow bus through the leafless trees. She could always gain access to the house via her window, but what would happen when she had to use the bathroom? She wasn't going to give precedence to her accidental twin, and let her have run of the place while she cowered behind closed doors.

"If we're going to be cooped up inside all weekend, we've got to have a plan," she stated, sliding the window pane closed after climbing inside. "Who goes where, when, and all that."

"You mean, I'll be around awhile?"

"Why not? I'm sick of school, and you probably love every minute."

"Only because you want me to. I didn't even object when your trig teacher called me 'Elizabeth'."

Mustang grimaced at the other's pleasant grin. "You make any friends today?" she mocked.

"Nobody likes you, so it'll take some time to show them I'm... you're a changed person. That is, if you live much longer."

"Huh?"

The latest edition of the *Helena Chronicle* was tugged from a ring binder and tossed on the rumpled bed. Mustang's jaw dropped at the headline:

"Murderer Escapes Federal Prison."

"Bailey?"

"Or Fairchild, however you want to remember him."

"I don't want to remember him..."

Elizabeth remarked, "You don't want to remember what happened in Ireland, either. I don't know why. I found myself daydreaming about Thomas' kiss in the cafeteria."

"Ireland? What are you talking about?"

"When you split me off, I'm guessing bits of your personality you've rejected over the years got dumped into my head. Including the ordeal with Peter, Brother Giovanni, Thomas, and the lunatic Abbondio Carneficina."

So, the elusive memory she'd been trying to pinpoint involved Peter O'Donnell and Thomas Burton, and a journey across the Atlantic - which explained her freshly wounded hands. But, how could Br. Giovanni become entangled with the pair, when he lived in Italy?

"Tell me everything," demanded Mustang.

Elizabeth recounted the details.

Hearing her exploits narrated by an objective third party - of sorts - made Mustang cringe. "The Irish authorities have undoubtedly contacted the FBI..."

"No, because you mandated every memory would be wiped clean, and a mysterious computer virus destroyed the electronic news coverage of Carneficina's rampage."

"There'll still be printed copies of the major papers floating around."

"Every one of them, reduced to pulp."

This conclusion calmed Mustang. "I'm getting more thorough, anyway. If only I could do the same to Bailey."

"No such luck." Elizabeth opened the main section of newsprint to reveal a three-column-wide photo of Jonas Fairchild and Mustang, credited with aiding the FBI in his capture.

"Oh, hell..."

"Seriously."

"Stop that!" Mustang snapped. "You talk like those snobby cheerleaders I hate so much."

"You made me to fit in with that crowd."

"Then, I may *unmake* you sooner than you think."

"Promises, promises."

Her stomach growling, Mustang pitched the newspaper across the room and marched out to the kitchen.

"You changed clothes quick," observed her mother from the living room.

The statement gave the teen pause. She had to think before recalling Elizabeth had chosen to wear a dressy yellow blouse and black slacks - which Mustang dug from her closet only for family funerals. "I... didn't want to get ice cream on my pants," she bluffed.

"Ice cream, this close to dinner?"

"Believe me, I'll eat whatever you cook, and then some." Or, her identical counterpart would.

Carrying the loaded bowl into her room, Mustang instructed Elizabeth to shed the school attire for something less... feminine. Fortunately, she kept drawers full of plain t-shirts and blue jeans, or black sweats. They could dress as

many twins did, and Maggie would never guess she had two daughters, instead of one, roaming the dwelling.

While Elizabeth reveled in a family dinner, Mustang propped up the pillows and stretched herself on the mattress, reading the *Chronicle* account of Fairchild's prison break. The recollection of an Idaho police matron informing her no one knew how the man had slipped from the California State Hospital's locked psychiatric ward might have been *deja vu* to the details listed in black and white.

His trial in Butte federal court had been a true media circus. Not only had the orthopedic surgeon killed three teens at Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High - where he'd impersonated a biology instructor - he'd broken the real Wilfrid Bailey's neck during a rest stop while traveling from Seattle via motor coach, usurping the older man's identity. Before reaching Seattle after his original escape, he'd killed two other women, an entire family who were foolish enough to offer him shelter one rainy December night - the holiday spirit with a macabre reward - and five vagrants. Fortunately, Mustang hadn't been subpoenaed to testify regarding her connection with the high school incident; she'd watched the three-week spectacle on the cable judicial network.

He'd been sentenced to life without parole, assigned to a high security penitentiary in Atwater, California. Two hours from San Francisco, the portion of a former military base seemed too remote for anyone to make good their flight. Bailey/Fairchild's disappearance, however, was unseen, unheard, and undetected until almost 12 hours after it transpired.

For Mustang, it might have been a cheap remake of Clint Eastwood's *Escape from Alcatraz*, without the need to navigate icy bay waters.

Occupying the lower right corner of that oversized, distorted image extracted from the school's surveillance cameras - when she'd been hiding Bailey in the boy's restroom immediately after he'd sliced those innocent students to pieces with a cast saw - was the latest color mug shot of the criminal, sporting that full head of bronzed hair and a scruffy salt-and-pepper beard. Mustang knew he could shave off the whiskers to alter his lean, furrowed features; he'd done so before.

She also knew, or suspected, he'd be returning to Montana.

In those early days of trying to control her power, she'd made some awful blunders dealing with casual acquaintances. Social interactions had been so limited through her youth, she hadn't developed a sense of discretion which prevented her from "rushing in where angels fear to tread." She'd given Bailey/Fairchild a chance to explain his actions, rather than leave him in a bloody

puddle for the police to apprehend. His attempt to use her as leverage to lessen his impending prison sentence failed, and he surely blamed her for that failure. She'd later witnessed his humiliation when, in a rush to freedom, he slammed full-force into an invisible barrier she erected in place of his jail cell door.

If the newspaper article was true, he'd not received psychological treatment or been prescribed the medications needed to neutralize his vicious nature. Quotes from the guards described the man as "pacing like a hungry tiger" in solitary confinement, and how his "deranged shaking of the iron bars vibrated walls in the adjacent cell block." He was also known to spend 48 straight hours curled up in a corner, weeping.

The warden had found Fairchild's journal, written in crayon on toilet paper and secreted in a crevice dug beneath the bed. It contained a list of addresses which, thankfully, the *Chronicle* had not published. She recognized her initials, though: E.C. D.

When last she'd expected him to show up at the house, she'd set up an observation post in the winter-deserted ranch hand's quarters. She managed to distract him before he could harm Joe and Maggie, or do any real damage. The same ploy would not work twice.

Folding the paper, she felt her heart pounding. Beyond the closed door, she heard Elizabeth and Maggie laughing at some indistinct joke Joe told. The usual dinner fare included abundant arguments...

The double didn't return to the bedroom until well past 8:00. Mustang overheard her helping Maggie wash the dishes, and the three watched weeknight game shows after the national evening news - on which Bailey was the lead story.

An eerie silence engulfed the family when the murderer's face flashed on the screen. Peering through a crack in the door, Mustang saw her parents turn to their supposed offspring, who assured them cheerily, "He'll be caught before he makes the Nevada state line."

Mustang glanced toward the bathroom, hoping she wouldn't vomit on the spot.

Dr. Jonas Fairchild was more than welcome to kill this unintentional duplicate.

The teen reluctantly acknowledged a *caveat* to that resolution. What if Elizabeth's death caused her own? The mistake was, after all, drawn directly from her self, half her being. Wouldn't harming one half, harm the other?

Twins who reputedly had telepathic bonds suffered equally when one was hurt. Was there such a link between these two mirror images?

An easy test existed to prove the theory. Mustang raised her wounded hands, intent on clapping them together as hard as she could. The agony would be mind-numbing, but worth seeing if Elizabeth reacted in kind.

She halted short of impact, however. She had seen - but not registered - Elizabeth's undamaged palms when the latter had opened the newspaper hours earlier. Like a perfect clone, none of the scars or injuries borne by the original translated to the copy.

Elizabeth could go to the devil, for all Mustang cared, and no adverse effects would befall her.

Let her be the bait, then, when Wilfrid Bailey came calling.

"You heard?" Elizabeth queried when she entered the room.

"I heard a lot of things. Be more specific."

"About Fairchild."

"Yes."

"I see fear in your eyes, girlfriend."

"Don't call me that. I'm not afraid, either. If that fugitive comes anywhere near the ranch, he'll be crushed by a convenient falling tree, or frozen solid by an arctic blast..."

"You're considering doing the same to me, aren't you?"

Mustang shrugged. "If you keep Mom and Dad happy, they'll be off my back. Behave at school, and the principal will leave me alone. You can serve a very useful purpose."

The hidden meaning of that last sentence eluded Elizabeth. Both girls spun toward the door at the sound of tapping.

"Who're you talking to, hon?" Maggie prodded through the wood.

Elizabeth replied, "Nobody, Mom."

"It's not healthy to talk to yourself, and worse to answer. People might get the wrong idea..."

"They already have," quipped Mustang.

Footsteps diminished along the hall. The pair considered each other.

"This is ludicrous, you know," said Elizabeth.

"No one will ever believe it."

"Why didn't you let me have some of the power?"

"What would you do with it?"

"Enjoy myself."

In some ways, the duplicate exhibited the maturity of a six-year-old. Then again, most "popular" girls at the high school qualified as puerile brats. They flirted with the boys, drove too fast, and spent their parents' money like water.

Only if a huge dose of reality - getting pregnant, for instance, or being hurt in a car accident - invaded their idyll, did they stop to consider the consequences of their actions.

Mustang still failed to think before she acted most days; at least the majority of her misdeeds were directed at protecting others or learning something, and not just mindless pursuits.

Regardless of how she tried to justify her gaffes, blood mingled with the burns on her hands. The one lesson she'd not taken to heart: keeping her nose out of other people's business. Whether they broke a leg, or suffered under the influence of narrow-minded parents, their lives were their own.

"I'm going to bed," Mustang grumbled, disheartened anew.

"Where will you sleep?"

"Here. Where else?"

"What about me?"

"It's a full-size mattress. There's room for two."

"What if Mom..."

"She's snug beneath the covers with a good book."

The ringing phone drew Maggie from the master bedroom, magazine in hand. "Hon, it's for you."

III

Without speaking, the two debated, "Me, or you?" Neither moved.

"Hon?"

"Coming, Mom." Mustang despised phone calls. No one who asked for her ever had good news.

She picked up the kitchen extension, waiting for Maggie to hang up in the bedroom. "Hello?"

"Elizabeth Duryea?" began the raspy tenor.

It required some restraint to counter, "Who's this?" instead of "Which one?"

"Montana State Police, ma'am."

Ma'am? Mustang bristled. Barely 18, and already I'm addressed like a senior citizen.

"Is there a problem?"

"Not really. Because your personal information was among others on the hit list created by Jonas Fairchild, we've been instructed to take you and your family into protective custody, if you request it, until he's apprehended."

“Are there any leads?”

“Not any from reliable sources.”

She persisted, “What do you mean by ‘protective custody’?”

“We’d transport you to a comfortable home in a secure location...”

“Horses included?”

“Excuse me?” the officer retorted.

“My father owns a ranch with nearly 500 horses needing daily care and feeding. There’s no way we can just pick up and leave...”

“You decline, then?”

“What about sending a couple men out here to patrol the place?”

“No can do, ma’am. We’re understaffed, as it is.”

“Gee, thanks.”

She broke the connection by firmly slamming the handset on its cradle. Best not to tell her parents they were, essentially, on their own if Bailey/Fairchild paid a visit.

Having a dog - as she’d tried to habitually convince her father - would give advance notice of any unwelcome arrivals. Since Joe’s favorite pet had died, though, he refused to get another.

An assortment of improvised booby-traps might do the trick...

First light would see her cobbling together a few nasty surprises for unwary trespassers. Between now and then, she wouldn’t sleep, either. Initial dealings with Wilfrid Bailey had carried with them a daunting reminder about her inexperience with these strange powers: any command issued had been nullified while she was unconscious.

She’d solved that problem, though, engaging in diligent practice.

A loud guffaw brought Maggie to the master bedroom door. Half-closed orbs peered down the hall at Mustang, dimly illuminated by the lone lamp burning over the stove. “Sorry,” the girl apologized.

“Practice” had nothing to do with it, she mused, filling a glass of water at the sink. One screw-up after another taught me, if the objective of my request extends beyond the immediate, the power will not diminish if I grab a little shut-eye.

As when she changed her hair color, to blend in with the natives of Sakurai, Japan. She’d never had to reiterate the instructions upon waking each day; her auburn locks remained deep ebony until she reversed the directive.

Nonetheless, if Bailey was coming, he wouldn’t catch her napping.

The weekend passed in relative quiet. Mustang raided the refrigerator during her overnight vigil, setting up a series of natural alarms in the wee hours

before appropriating the bed and sleeping through the afternoon. Elizabeth devised her own distractions, some of which her counterpart never would have considered acceptable - setting up a webpage on an internet social networking site, for instance.

Mustang flew into a rage when Maggie commended her for “expanding her horizons” Sunday evening.

“Expanding my *what?*” the girl echoed, en route to the bathroom.

“I’m glad to see you reaching out to others your age. I’ve always been worried about you being so isolated out here, with only the hired hands around.”

She stormed back to the bedroom, where Elizabeth was changing into pajamas. “Are you out of your mind?”

Her double scoffed, “I mustn’t get angry. I do horrible things when I’m angry.”

“Oh, shut up!”

Elizabeth’s mouth continued to move, but no sounds were emitted.

Mustang conceded the futility of arguing with herself and hoping to win.

She relaxed Monday morning after Elizabeth left for school. Her bones were already frozen, from having ventured out to break the ice on the horses’ water troughs, so she buried herself beneath the quilts to get warm - and fell asleep. Maggie’s terrified screams from the living room jolted her awake around noon.

The girl heard Joe’s raised voice, yelling over his wife’s babbling but failing to pacify her. Though garbled through the closed door, it sounded to Mustang like he kept repeating, “She’ll be all right.”

Who’ll be all right? she puzzled.

The emergency broadcast tone reached her ears; her mother must’ve seen something on the mid-day news which upset her. Creeping to her own small television, Mustang turned the volume down and focused on the screen.

An Amber Alert had been issued because Elizabeth “Mustang” Duryea had been abducted from Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High School while crossing the campus to the student cafeteria.

The kidnapper was described by one young witness as “older, thin, brown hair, not too tall, with a dark mustache.”

“Oh, hell.”

Mustang ripped her parka from the oversized closet, hesitating only a second to consider Jack Parsons’ tattered journals, concealed in a secret compartment she’d cut in the drywall. That man would have no advice for such a situation, she decided, other than his warning about using her power on

psychologically unstable individuals, since their mental functions didn't work according to nature. Best to rely on her own knowledge of Wilfrid Bailey, and stop him before he committed another murder.

Bolting out the window, she could still hear her mother weeping as she skulked toward the barn.

Heartbeat would get her to town more quickly than walking, though the girl estimated Bailey wouldn't stay in Canyon Creek long. He'd long since threatened to truss Mustang between two trees, and leave her to the elements - as she had once done to him. If he'd stolen a car, he could be anywhere, but he'd posed as the biology teacher for six months, with plenty of occasions to find secluded locations in the immediate area, ideal for torturing victims of his fanatical obsession.

She'd grown up in the county, and had wandered every inch of it. Her face - and distinctive red hair - hidden within the fur-trimmed hood, she rode at full gallop across the ranch's northern perimeter, jumping a barbed-wire fence into open country. Three miles along, an unpaved, dirt track wound through Ol' Man Nolan's overgrown corn fields - the farmer had died, heirless, three years before, and his estate was still unsettled by the court - leading to a remote section of Canyon Creek with no public access. If Bailey wasn't there, she'd try elsewhere.

The pinto's nostrils emitted puffs of steam as his hooves pounded the frozen earth. Mustang tugged the reins to slow him as they neared the creek bed, glimpsing a jarringly familiar form, unconscious, dangling between two willow trees.

So, he'd attacked Elizabeth from the rear, injecting her with a sedative, stolen from what pharmacy or doctor's locked supply cupboard?

She wore only dark slacks and a thin green blouse - the dress coat she'd plucked from Mustang's closet, another funeral standard, must still be hanging in her locker at school. Exposed too long to the biting cold weather, she'd develop frostbite and hypothermia.

Bailey himself was nursing a small campfire ten feet from where Elizabeth hung. Mustang recalled another threat he'd made while they were stranded in the wilds of Idaho: cooking and eating her.

The mangled tin can discarded on the ground indicated he more likely was warming a pot of cheap stew or beans.

It amazed Mustang the man felt no need to rush his torture, no concern about being pursued by frantic law enforcement agencies. Pulling a burning twig from the fire, he lit a fat cigar and settled on an overturned log to await his dinner.

He might have been an ordinary businessman, relaxing after a long day at the office.

The teen calculated how much fun she could have with this situation, despite her power causing prior mischievous exploits to backfire outrageously. Bailey already a certified lunatic, what would seeing double do to his precarious mental state?

She could, of course, imitate suspense movies where the hero, keeping to the shadows, rescued the hostages while the villains were distracted. She had her own bone to pick with this criminal, however. Taking full advantage of the circumstances made perfect sense.

Sliding from the saddle, she tied Heartbeat's reins to a low branch. Throwing back her hood so her resemblance to his captive could not be mistaken, she emerged from the trees.

"Hey, Doc! You better have another syringe of the good stuff, because you jabbed the wrong kid."

Bailey's head snapped around. He dropped the cigar, but not before singeing his bushy mustache and sucking in an entire lungful of pungent tobacco smoke. Mustang waited until his coughing fit passed, smirking wickedly.

"You gonna live?" she joked.

He rose swiftly, knocking the grate and pot into the flames. The loss of his meal didn't faze him, yet a tentative edge claimed his rough baritone. "I've seen you so often in my dreams, now I'm seeing you in multiples when I'm awake. Ah, well, more for the killing."

Mustang had forgotten Bailey's preference for hunting knives, his calloused right hand already twirling the latest acquisition. "How many dead bodies litter your route from California?"

"A choice selection. Why so curious?"

"I saw the same gleam in another madman's eyes, and you'll never beat his record."

"Who?"

"Adolf Hitler."

"Liar! He's been dead for sixty years!"

"If I can do this" - the sharp steel blade melted between his fingers, forcing him to drop the hilt - "why couldn't I travel in time?"

Seeming to bend and retrieve the useless weapon, Bailey instead grabbed the spare hidden in a sheath around his right ankle. Gleaming silver cut the air; she side-stepped and the knife ricocheted off a rock back at its owner. It sliced the sleeve of his black quilted jacket as he dove for cover.

“I thought you wanted to break my bones with your bare hands,” Mustang challenged.

He bounded to his feet like a much younger man. “All in due time.”

“You expect me not to resist in any way?”

“Of course you will and, the more you do, the greater the pain I can inflict.”

They began circling the bleak clearing, two wrestlers assessing each other’s vulnerabilities. From a purely physical perspective, no possibility existed for Mustang to defend herself. Whatever psychotic episodes might have debilitated Bailey while incarcerated, he’d still managed to maintain optimum fitness and muscular strength, visible through his - stolen? - gold turtleneck and straight-leg jeans.

“How’d you escape?” Mustang queried, hoping to break his concentration.

“Opportunities presented themselves every day. Prisoners confined to locked cells, the guards thought they could get sloppy.”

A tiger bored with the chase, he vaulted over the campfire, caught her arm and flipped her into the underbrush. Teeth rattled when her jaws slammed together on impact. The wind knocked out of her, she stared at this fugitive, unsure what end he planned for her.

“Don’t give up,” he taunted, flexing his fingers. “You’re the first worthy opponent I’ve had since they shipped me to Atwater.”

Maybe, just maybe... “Help me up, then. My shoe’s caught on something.”

Bailey approached, extending his left hand. Mustang grasped it, rising, and twisted as hard as she could, bending his arm in an odd direction. He stumbled backward, then she pushed him into a pair of birch trees, which enveloped him in their branches, immobilizing arms and legs.

“Why must nature always fight your battles?” he fumed. “Are you afraid I’ll win?”

“There’s no prize for murder!” She hobbled to the weeping willows and, without using her power, broke the bonds encircling Elizabeth’s wrists and ankles. The girls tumbled in the snow when the latter sagged against her counterpart. Mustang rolled from under the weight, troubled when the other’s hand flopped aside limply.

Bailey’s eruption of maniacal laughter didn’t soothe her dismay. She assumed the cold wind was tickling his ears, or something equally bizarre.

“What drugs did you use on her?” she yelled up the tree.

“My own special blend. I call it ‘Slow Death’. I perfected it in prison, stealing ingredients from the janitor’s bucket when he came to clean my cell, and from the kitchen. My fellow inmates served as test subjects, since I didn’t have any lab rats. A dose with their lunch and I listened to agonized moans as their organs shriveled through the night. Next morning, the guards would find them dead. The other prisoners couldn’t stand it, didn’t know what was happening.” Bailey’s cackling increased. “This one - this *impostor*, if what you say is true - her metabolism was too high, or she had an allergy to the chemicals. She barely revived when I sliced her Achilles tendon, and didn’t have the strength to scream before she expired.”

Mustang squatted and felt Elizabeth’s neck.

No pulse.

A life is a life - or half a life - no matter how exasperating, and Bailey would no longer exert any mastery over the innocents, the teen swore. Straightening to her unimpressive height, she directed a fresh host of branches in their attack, scratching and squeezing him. His hysteria warped into petrified whimpering.

“You can’t keep me up here forever!”

“You’ll stay there until the police come,” Mustang assured him.

“They’ll never find us so far from town.”

“Not for awhile, anyway.” The girl had work to do, to prevent a series of unwelcome questions about two identical Elizabeth Duryeas. Among the supplies Bailey had brought to the site, a shovel. An optimist would view it as a tool to extinguish the fire at the proper time. Mustang was no optimist. Pitting his strength against the frozen soil, he would have dug a shallow grave and left Elizabeth to decompose and be devoured by wolves and bears come spring.

She hadn’t a quarter of Bailey’s physical capacity, but she had options. The ground softened beneath her, and she emptied a six-by-three foot hole, piling the dirt nearby. A twinge of remorse at having wished for this death accompanied her dragging the corpse to its final resting place.

“If this is how much I weigh, I’ve got to lose a few pounds,” she stammered, chest heaving.

She didn’t bother marking the filled plot with broken branches tied in a make-shift cross. Exhausted, she sank on the log beside the campfire, warming her hands near the blaze. An acre of burning trees would summon the authorities, she knew, but why damage nature’s own creations?

Her head slowly swiveled toward Bailey. His brown eyes reflected absolute terror - had he not once mentioned seeing a person’s face in the instant

they accepted their forthcoming violent death? She'd seen a different version: the expression of peace when an individual understood the turmoil of this incarnation had reached its close.

Bailey's demise was not imminent, not by her hand. She might yet convince him otherwise, and give him a taste of his own "Slow Death".

A spark seemed to ignite the birch trees constraining the twitching madman. Whimpers became hideous pleas for mercy.

IV

"Oh, shut up," Mustang censured the fugitive, after a good thirty seconds. "There's an old myth about a burning bush which gave off heat and light, but was never consumed..."

Bailey didn't believe her. He jerked and tugged at the branches, trying to pull his feet away from the flickering blaze. "This is cruel and unusual punishment!" he cried.

From her place on the log, she scowled. "You don't want to go there, Doc. What about hacking up three students, or butchering an entire family, one by one, as the others watched? Your fellow inmates may have been evil reprobates, but did you have the right to run fatal experiments on them? As for what you did here, today..."

"I thought she was you. The hair, the face..."

"She *was* me. A better me or, more accurately, me as a typical, modern teenager. Still, what did I ever do to you that rated this kind of treatment? Back in the day, you weren't motivated by revenge. You just wanted to be left alone..."

"Because of you, I wasn't left alone. I've been hounded by detectives eager to close unsolved murder cases, hoping to pin them on me. If I'd signed ten percent of their fictitious confessions, the blood of nearly a hundred men would have been on my hands."

"So, you're blaming me for you getting caught? Your fate would've been little different had I left you in the puddle of blood on the biology lab floor."

"No. The police wouldn't have taken me alive."

"A suicide wish? If that's how you wanted it, why didn't you use that 'Slow Death' on yourself in prison?"

"I was waiting for the right moment."

The flames roared upward; he squealed.

"Why isn't this the right moment?" prompted Mustang.

“When I’d meted out justice to every name on my list, I had a hypodermic ready to inject myself.”

Another extremist with a distorted concept of justice, the teen breathed. “Let me guess at some of the names on this list: the judge, the federal prosecutor and his assistant, myself...”

“Ben Espinoza,” Bailey added.

Ironic, Mustang chuckled, she might be saving the FBI instructor, when she’d once sent him splashing into Loch Ness, leaving his cadets to rescue him.

Bailey’s recitation ceased when Heartbeat whinnied nervously.

Approaching snowmobiles vibrated the ground; Mustang knew who owned them.

Her father.

Unresolved issues with that man raised a cunning idea in the girl’s head.

Why not reopen the grave and let the world think her dead? Jack Parsons had found a reasonable peace at Boleskine House, after the FBI circulated news of his demise in 1952. Being 18, she could do as she pleased, without parental interference and, with her powers, money was not a factor...

She walked toward her horse, content with the prospect of tending these animals, even if it did mean completing the school year.

Unarmed ranch hands and three shotgun-toting county deputies rushed the clearing. Mustang hadn’t expected Joe to be among them, and she was right. She watched as the officers surrounded their prey, ordering him down from the virtually-burning trees.

“Don’t try anything desperate,” barked the wiry sergeant, barrel trained on the fugitive.

Coat torn, and brown hair disheveled, Bailey gazed past them at the girl.

The absurdity of the situation struck him, and that demented laugh bubbled forth.

Sad.

She dispersed the illusory fire and released his bonds; he collapsed into the ranch hands’ waiting grasp. One of the deputies pulled a straight jacket from the storage compartment of his snowmobile, but they didn’t truly need it. The man known as both Jonas Fairchild and Wilfrid Bailey had deteriorated from an affluent orthopedic surgeon to a shattered wraith.

They led him away; a police cruiser must’ve been parked on the old service road, which would transport him to the local jail until arrangements for his extradition to California were finalized. Deserted in the wilderness, the teen heaped snow atop campfire embers, gathering the empty tin can, sauce pan and make-shift metal grate. The spilt stew would make a good meal for smaller creatures as they foraged for food.

Retrieving the hunting knife Bailey had thrown at her, she noticed a small duffel he'd stuffed inside the overturned, hollow log. Unzipping the pouch, she saw what she guessed would be inside, based on her conversation with the escaped convict. One empty syringe - used on Elizabeth, probably - and one filled with an opaque green liquid.

Bailey's "Slow Death".

Safely disposing of the poison would be difficult. Mustang didn't want to eject the fluid where animals might lick it up and later die. Throwing it in the creek would do equal damage. To carry it all the way home would be problematic, also. Other than a hospital, she could think of nowhere the substance could be neutralized and discarded.

This quandary was interrupted by gunshots. Her heart skipped a beat; how could Bailey remain a threat to anyone?

She ran and swung herself onto Heartbeat's back. Tapping his flank with her boot propelled him forward at a break-neck pace. Not two minutes later, she came upon a scene reminiscent of that fateful day at Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High. This time, though, Bailey lay in a puddle of his own blood, not that of his victims.

"Is he dead?" she asked.

A weak groan provided the answer.

The sergeant announced, "We've called for an ambulance, but we'll have to get him to the road."

"Don't bother," she stated. She'd been an accessory to his flight after killing the students, and one motivation for this most recent escape. Anything she did now would pale in comparison.

Passing Heartbeat's reins to the nearest ranch hand, Mustang carried the duffel to the injured man. He lay on his right side; the bullet had entered his back as he fled, and passed straight through his lung. Two open wounds pumped red fountains onto the snow.

"Doc, can you hear me?" she whispered, crouching low.

He gurgled, "Yes."

"Compared to your little concoction, this could be one hell of a slow death."

Brown eyes flickered. "You have it?"

She nodded.

"You won't inject me, will you?"

"I hate needles," she snorted.

A dripping hand groped toward her. Her back to the deputies - who looked queasy for all the blood - she held the compartment open, and his fingers closed around the syringe.

She assured him, "You don't have to do this."

"I won't waste the next thirty years in prison."

Mustang recoiled when a dribble of the solution squirted from the needle. He could easily have jammed it in her arm, given her proximity and his unstable mindset. The dosage disappeared into his heart when he thrust the point between his ribs.

Ten seconds later, his head drooped into the muck.

Before signaling the deputies, Mustang tucked the spent syringe back in the cloth bag. No need for them to be party to a suicide. If a coroner performed an autopsy, he'd logically conclude the bullet wounds had caused the death, and forego toxicology tests.

She mounted Heartbeat and trotted toward home, followed by the ranch hands on their snowmobiles. Her mother actually embraced her when she crossed the kitchen threshold, after grooming and feeding her pinto. The girl had forgotten about the Amber Alert and the news coverage...

Which continued on the evening broadcasts with reports of Bailey's capture and death. Archive footage from the previous year's student murders, the trial, and new commentary gleaned from customers departing the Canyon Creek post office ran almost five minutes.

"Must've been a slow news day," Mustang grumbled, headed to her bedroom.

"Don't you want any dinner, hon?" suggested Maggie.

The teen recalled this sandy-haired, middle-aged housewife had not shared her first-hand experience of violence. First, Italian Brother Luigi attempting to gun down Francis of Assisi in a shrine - shooting her, instead - less than a month later, Lyndon Bixby stabbed by a motorcycle gang. World War II German soldiers blown to pieces by British and American bombs; Jews and Christians alike hung and gassed in the concentration camp. The victims of a crazed Enochian magickian strewn across Ireland, according to Elizabeth's account of the repressed memory.

And Maggie wanted to know if she was hungry.

That was when she remembered the pleasant evening meals her parents had shared with Elizabeth the past few days. It was *Elizabeth* Maggie had hugged so warmly, not her. *Elizabeth* would be fed carefully prepared meat, potatoes and vegetables; basic fare was sufficient for the rebellious Mustang.

Another impulse leaving her to clear the residual trail of disaster. Bad enough, her relationship with the two who should have been guiding her through this tumult. She couldn't rely on their understanding or compassion; they showed none. Confiding her deepest anguish was impossible.

On the other hand, their hopes a changed daughter had begun resolving her difficulties at home and school would be dashed the moment Mustang opened her mouth.

Could she compromise herself to that degree, to placate Joe and Maggie?
No.

Yes, she'd seen in Elizabeth what she could be, with a great deal of effort. Truth told, she didn't like the characteristics displayed by this alter ego. Chancing upon her suspended from the willow trees undeniably had an disconcerting effect on Mustang, which words could not adequately describe. Learning Elizabeth was dead, and burying her - burying *herself* - would have crept out most people, regardless of their age. Rod Serling couldn't have written such a petrifying installment of the *Twilight Zone* if he'd spent six months on the script.

"Mom, I..." she stammered.

Maggie wrapped her arm around Mustang's shoulders. "What is it, hon? I know this has been awful for you."

The unusual gesture made the girl shudder. She brushed off the hand. "Good night."

Trying to stave off an emotional riptide, Mustang sat on her bed until the house was quiet. Then, she stole into the living room and switched on the computer.

Logging on to the social networking site required a password. All she wanted to do was delete the webpage Elizabeth had created, and the effort seemed thwarted. That is, until the glow of the monitor screen fell on a small notepad Joe kept beside the keyboard to jot down phone numbers of potential buyers for the horses he periodically posted for sale.

The top sheet retained an impression of the letters scribbled on the previous page. The curve of the letters was eerily familiar. Tilting the pad at a specific angle, Mustang could read, "I.D: EDuryea01," and "Password: Heartbeat."

She almost laughed aloud.

The design Elizabeth had cobbled together from old photos her parents had stored on the computer's hard drive and a slightly fabricated personal history had seen unrivaled traffic that day, to Mustang's surprise. As news of the Amber

Alert had spread across state lines, hundreds had posted messages wishing her well. Even some classmates from the high school had added their comments.

“This morning, you said ‘Hi,’ to me for the first time,” wrote a junior. “Since you came back to school, I’ve admired your independence, and really want to get to know you better. I hope you’re okay.”

Another student remarked, “I can always see your red head coming down the hall, though you’re not as tall as some of the other girls. It makes me laugh, even when I feel like crap.”

Not one to encourage friendships, Mustang couldn’t believe she’d had anywhere near the influence the pages and pages of entries contended. By the time she’d reached the fifth screen, the desk top was wet with her tears.

Though she professed not to care about the opinions of others, this outpouring of respect and concern gave her a strength beyond that supplied when she summoned the natural elements. She’d wished for Elizabeth to be “popular” at school, only to have her view of social popularity confirmed. Being true to self meant far, far more.

Despite the moving tone of the messages, Mustang hit the “Delete” key, and the webpage vanished. She’d have to catch the bus in a few short hours, and needed some uninterrupted sleep.

Uninterrupted, to be sure, since she forgot to set the alarm clock. Maggie’s light tapping on the bedroom door had accelerated to full-blown pounding before the girl responded.

“Anything wrong, Mom?”

“It’s nearly 6:30. Don’t want to be late.”

“Right.”

The flip-flop of slippers diminished, then returned. “You up?”

“Sure.” Mustang had pulled the quilt over her face and shut her eyes once more.

“It occurred to me last night while I was sorting the laundry: you weren’t wearing the same clothes when you got home yesterday as when you left.”

“Oh, hell.” Fully alert now, she hadn’t considered the necessity of stripping the corpse merely to save her mother’s sanity.

“I suppose the blouse and slacks got pretty torn up when that man dragged you through the woods.”

“Whatever you say.”

The solicitous tone soured. “Why so grouchy, hon? You’ve been so sweet and helpful the last few days, it’s been like having a different person around the house.”

“That’s because it *was* a different person.” Mustang regretted the words, no more had they escaped her lips.

The door opened. “What?”

“Nothing, Mom. Nothing.”

“Talk to me, hon. You know you can talk to me. Our dinner conversations over the weekend were so pleasant...”

“Pleasant isn’t the same as meaningful, and I don’t see a time when we’ll be able to have a meaningful discussion about anything.”

She could see her mother’s disappointment in the bowed head and sagging shoulders.

“I’m sorry, Mom.”

“I’m sorry, too. I really thought you’d made some positive changes.”

As Mustang shuffled to the bathroom, she wondered if things would’ve been better had she let the county deputies find Elizabeth’s body in its grave, and gone off on her own. Her parents might have grieved, but since they’d never really understood her, their loss wouldn’t have been that great. The students at Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High would have received counseling, like after the biology lab murders, and resumed their own lives.

She’d made her choice, and could not undo what had been done. Maggie’s mention of positive changes struck her as humorous; she’d been trying to use her powers in positive ways since Peter O’Donnell gave her that advice at Bryan Duryea’s funeral. Every ostensibly positive incident spawned more negatives to tilt the scales the wrong way, and the struggle to right the balance drained and befuddled her.

No wonder nature sent tornadoes, hurricanes and earthquakes to devastate humanity and disrupt technology. Trying to make any sense of dealing with human beings could drive a person crazy.

As it had Wilfrid Bailey.

Splashing cold water on her face, Mustang raised her eyes to the medicine chest mirror. He’d been right in his prediction: some days, she didn’t recognize her own reflection.

Or, at least, didn’t like what she saw.

“Bus’ll be here in ten minutes, hon!” called Maggie.

“Right, Mom.”

She felt totally helpless.