

The Mustang Chronicles:

Pursued Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

“De Niro!”

Whispers of the renowned name circulated through the corridors of Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High that April Thursday, freezing many students in their tracks. No one had an inkling of why the famous, dark-haired, rugged-miened actor would travel to such a remote Montana county, or visit the school.

Not even Elizabeth “Mustang” Duryea.

Though she had her suspicions.

One cable network had been running a tribute to Robert De Niro over the past few weeks, and she’d laid awake nights, watching *Raging Bull*, *Taxi Driver*, *Ronin* and other classics. If the natural forces - which responded to her commands, thanks to the power bequeathed to her by occultist and scientist Jack Parsons - mistakenly acted upon her desire to meet the man someday, and had brought him here...

But, just outside her Senior English classroom, he passed within three feet of her, and never glanced in her direction. Instead, he whisked into the main office, slamming the door with detectable anger.

Mrs. Utrecht grabbed the teen’s shoulder and yanked her across the threshold as the bell reverberated through the building.

“Oh, hell,” Mustang hissed, in response to both incidents.

Try as she did not to worry about both this unexpected event and the quiz covering two acts of *The Crucible*, Mustang could not shake a sensation of impending doom. Her stomach so knotted, she couldn’t eat lunch, instead straining to hear an announcement blaring from the closed-circuit television, cafeteria din drowning out the sound.

Fortunately, words spoken by the harried principal were repeated in script scrolling across the screen.

Robert De Niro had *not* come to Canyon Creek.

Mustang sighed, all too aware everyone had a twin somewhere. She momentarily considered battling the line of underclassmen for a slice of cold turkey and dry dressing.

That’s when the entire room went silent.

The man every student had believed Robert De Niro appeared at the microphone of the fake news desk the journalism class used each morning to broadcast the day’s schedule and birthday list.

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen,” he began with a voice of gravel.

Twitters from the young crowd at being addressed like adults, when many of the teachers still called them “children”.

“My name is Cal Simmons, and I’m a detective with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.”

Stunned chuckles and confused glances at every table.

“I’m here with special permission of the United States government, investigating a series of bank robberies across the border. While we have no surveillance photos of the perpetrators, we have traced the suspect’s vehicle into Montana, as far south as Helena.”

All eyes were now glued to elevated televisions peppering the huge chamber’s walls.

“We would like your assistance in tracking the culprits. The ring leader is possibly a high school or college student in her late teens or early twenties. She possesses technology which jams security systems - including the video cameras - rendering them utterly useless during the robberies, which is why we have no footage of the crimes. Nor can we understand why no two people describe her the same. The gang may use a gas to knock the employees unconscious, though none of the victims recall blacking out.”

Even for Mustang, this was getting interesting.

Until he added, “Given the unusual meteorological activity in this area over the past year or so, we think the robbers may be testing their equipment in the region, and disrupting natural weather patterns as a result.”

At that moment, Mustang wished she were invisible.

“If you know of anyone with an... unusual interest in science, or who may be missing school or taking unexplained trips, please contact your local law enforcement agency. I will also be leaving my e-mail address and local phone number with the principal. Tips can be made anonymously, and we will protect those who come forward, should an arrest be made. Thank you.”

Her appetite again gone, the bell summoning students back to class resolved the debate about eating.

This time, she hadn’t done anything, but prior actions were coming back to haunt her.

Had it been De Niro, she could’ve shaken his hand, begged an autograph, and apologized profusely. Even apologies wouldn’t compensate for misleading the authorities.

Nor could she explain. Bad enough Ben Espinoza of the FBI knew the truth. Few others - still living - did, and none of her classmates.

The RCMP might have already contacted the FBI, though. Crammed with a thousand possibilities, Mustang's head pounded long before she emerged into the fresh, early spring air en route to her bus. Shielding her eyes from glaring sun, she navigated a press of bodies, colliding with the sole motionless object in the midst of the fray: Cal Simmons.

He bent and retrieved her backpack with surprising agility for one so... advanced in years. He didn't readily release it, however, when she clamped her fingers around the shoulder straps.

"How long have you had red hair?" he queried, squinting.

"All my life."

"You ever been to Canada?"

"Nope."

Beneath a deeply furrowed brow, he pressed, "You into science at all?"

"I'm into horses. That's why I'm called Mustang." The busses were starting to move, and she jerked her bag from his grip. "Gotta go."

Damn her auburn tresses! she mused, sliding onto the last vacant seat as the driver closed the doors. Pretending not to glance through smudged glass, she saw Simmons staring at her from the front entrance.

She, in turn, stared at the living room television that evening, her father letting the set drone while he read the newspaper in his favorite chair. The nightly Hollywood gossip show actually reported Robert De Niro in Montana, confirmed by photos published in the *Helena Chronicle*.

So, even journalists could be fooled.

The real story was far more horrendous than one of mistaken identity, and upset her slumber through the night. From here on, her tendency to interfere in other people's lives had to be kept under tight rein. A slip with Simmons in the area could be devastating.

Both the *Chronicle* and gossip websites retracted reports involving Robert De Niro the following day. The actor was filming his latest movie in Italy, according to a publicist.

Mustang still walked on eggshells upon arrival at the high school Friday morning. The whole reason she'd skipped most of her junior year was to prevent her powers from wreaking havoc on campus. Gaining some self-control, she accepted a deal which allowed her to resume her studies as a senior, with graduation now less than eight weeks hence.

The murmuring she heard winding through the corridors included her name on this particular day. Nothing new in that, given her distinctive features and abrasive personality. No more had she set her books on the desk in first hour,

however, when the teacher pointed toward the exit. “Principal wants to see you, Mustang.”

Teeth clenched, the teen shuffled to the administrative suite.

Where Cal Simmons had perched himself on the secretary’s desk, chatting with the demure blonde.

He straightened to attention so rapidly, the Canadian Prime Minister might’ve just entered the room, then managed a semi-smile. “Ah, our horse enthusiast. How are your bruises today?”

“Bruises?” Mustang retorted.

“My elbow hit you pretty hard in the ribcage yesterday. I figured...”

“You figured wrong.”

“Better that, than to be sued for police brutality.”

“Is that all?”

The secretary nodded, giggling when Cal flashed her a grin.

“The principal didn’t want me?”

Simmons clarified, “He wanted you, because I wanted you.”

He didn’t hear what she mumbled under her breath as the door closed.

Nor did she hear what he asked the secretary: “She seems normal enough.”

“Depends on your definition of normal,” came the woman’s reply. “Strange things happen whenever she’s around.”

“Until you’ve lived in New York, you’ve no idea what strange is.”

Still, Mustang noticed him near every classroom throughout the day, and interrogating her teachers after the respective period’s end.

She hated secrecy, though she preferred to avoid confrontation entirely rather than lie. She had nothing to fear from the Mountie; she’d robbed no banks. And she would have him out of her hair before the sun set.

Plenty of distractions in the meantime.

Chores on a horse ranch could be never-ending; Mustang didn’t mind the long hours spent grooming the stock and tending new foals. She loved when the hands gathered at the corral to break the stallions - even tried it herself once and, fortunately, bounced on the ground when the ornery roan threw her, rather than breaking bones. Perhaps the only duty she considered onerous involved pre-dawn rounds to break ice on water troughs during winter months.

A thin layer of snow might still cover the earth, but spring would come soon, and she could sleep an extra hour.

Riding her pinto, Heartbeat, through the northern fields before returning to the house and a strained dinner with her parents, Mustang passed a tree she’d torched the previous year, sampling her powers. What a waste, she chided herself.

Yet, the decaying bark would fertilize the soil, and new life would burst forth when the ground thawed.

She'd been young and stupid, nonetheless. Rather than let her affinity with nature lay dormant, she'd yearned to try it, even lighting a street in Boise, Idaho, while there for a cousin's funeral.

These ruminations did not block the sense of another presence in the wooded acreage. She felt binoculars upon her and rolled her hazel eyes skyward. Nervous fingers clenched the pommel and steered her mount through scraggly underbrush. "I mustn't get angry. I do horrible things when I get angry," she reminded herself.

Isidro Rodriguez, up from Mexico for the season, galloped past her on a panting mare, whooping and waving his hat as if to scare a flock of crows.

"Izzy, what's up?" she wondered.

He circled her without slowing. "There's a fire on the western edge of the property! With all the dry tinder, it could burn 100 acres before nightfall!"

Mustang didn't need to look in the interloper's direction to realize he'd set the fire to test her. Far from any access roads, no fire truck or water hose could reach that portion of the ranch. The only way to douse the flames would be if she had some special device which would affect the weather.

Little did Cal Simmons know, she required no clever contraption - to scramble the feeds on security cameras or make rain fall from cloudless skies.

She wouldn't perform for him, regardless. A trespasser, she steered Heartbeat toward the stand of maples where he was concealed and subdued a temptation to trample him outright.

"Officer Simmons!" she hollered upon approach.

A slight hesitation before he stepped from the lengthening shadows. "My correct title is sergeant."

"I don't care if you're a general. Unless you have a warrant, you have thirty seconds to hoof it back to your car, or I'll call the county police and have you arrested."

"And why would you take such a risk, Miss Mustang?" he countered. "You and I can talk civilly, here and now, or I can have you dragged down to the station and question you with bars between us."

"Others have tried, and failed." She could've kicked herself for uttering the truth.

It had the anticipated effect of heightening Simmons' interest, evident in his widened brown eyes.

She bit her lip so hard in regret, blood dripped on her upturned palm - which would forever display the scars from traveling via lightning bolts.

“Last summer, you disappeared for nearly a month,” he began. “The ranch hands tell me your parents never filed a missing person report.”

“So?”

“Before that, you vanished for a week. And, somehow, your passport records show you never left Scotland.”

“Lousy record keepers, those Scots.”

He neared Heartbeat, who whinnied and recoiled. “Where’s your secret lab, and what weapons are you developing?”

“Sergeant Simmons, where I go and what I do are none of your business. If my parents are okay with it, why aren’t you?”

“Because parents inevitably believe the best about their offspring, even when they carry rifles into school buildings and kill their teachers. Or, help psychopathic murderers escape justice.”

“Wilfrid Bailey is dead.”

“So are a score of your other acquaintances over the past 18 months. You’re either jinxed, Miss Mustang, or you kill for kicks.”

“You sound like FBI criminal profilers they interview on the news.”

“Oddly, your FBI record is devoid of any such profile.”

“Because I’m not a criminal.”

“Are you a scientist?” he prodded.

“I’m lucky to have passed biology.”

“You’re lucky to be passing any of your classes, given your attendance history.”

“My attendance this year has been perfect.”

“Thanks only to an ultimatum from the principal. Where would you be right now, if you didn’t have to ride the bus to school each day?”

“Right here, with the horses I love.”

“Not in Italy, or Ireland, or... Canada?”

Grasping his ploy, she asserted herself. “Why would your bank robbers drive south into Montana with their stash of Canadian bills? To use them here, they’d have to exchange them for U.S. dollars...”

“The internet is a vast tool.”

“And a good hacker can trace transactions back to their origin in a millisecond.”

“How would you know that?”

“Anybody who’s seen a modern cop drama knows that.” She raised her hands in submission. “Look, Sarge, I’m not your high-tech crook. The past few months, I’ve stayed close to home, and I’m sure I have a verifiable alibi for any dates you can name.”

Another blunder; he yanked her from the saddle with surprising strength for his age. Seizing her wrists, he prevented her from fleeing.

“Yet, you’ve been burned by acid, or grabbed the live end of electrical wires...”

“Lightning.”

“Impossible. You’d be dead.”

Struggling against his grasp, her rage erupted. “If you’re trying to catch a scientist, you need a refresher course in science, yourself.”

The bolt struck between them, charring their clothes and singeing their hair. Simmons released Mustang and landed in the brambles, while she massaged fresh wounds on her flesh.

Cracked lips stammered, “How’d...”

Smirking, Mustang wedged her foot into the stirrup and urged Heartbeat into a canter before he could finish.

An unpredicted rain shower extinguished the grass fire along the western fence before she reached the main trail toward the house.

With any luck, her parents might’ve eaten dinner without her.

II

The Untouchables kept Mustang awake Friday night, uncut, uncensored, and quite bloody when Al Capone - played by Robert De Niro - smashes one of his underlings with a baseball bat. Bizarrely, the teen followed Sean Connery’s recitation of the “Chicago Way” code: “He pulls a knife, you pull a gun. He sends one of yours to the hospital, you send one of his to the morgue.”

Hadn’t she bested Cal Simmons, calling down a lightning bolt to prove her superiority?

Still, like Eliot Ness, he was a man trying to do a job: find enterprising criminals who were depriving banks of money.

Harassing her unnecessarily in the process.

She switched off her bedside lamp after midnight, and rolled toward the window, expecting to see shafts of moonlight through the curtains. Instead, she saw a vaguely human shadow, and leapt off the mattress. If former ranch hand Eddie Daniels hadn’t outgrown such puerile pranks...

“You bastard!” she squealed, raising the lower pane of glass. “What in hell...”

Not Daniels. Simmons, scrubbed and sporting a clean suit. “You have good taste in movies, anyway, Miss Mustang. Y’know how many times I’ve been mistaken for that De Niro?”

“Twice this week, at least,” she chuckled, despite her annoyance.

“Twice a day, sometimes. I’ve done everything to change my appearance, but we must’ve been twins separated at birth.”

“He plays a lot of cops, and you are one. Could be something to it.” She sobered. “Why are you hanging around outside my bedroom?”

Handcuffs snapped around her wrists, rendering her momentarily helpless. “You’re coming with me to Edmonton. Even if you aren’t the ring leader of the robbers, you possess knowledge that may expedite our investigation.”

“Have you asked my parents’ permission?” she challenged innocently.

“I get the impression they’ll think you’re off on another of your unplanned journeys.”

“Do you also get the impression you may end up dead?”

“Seriously? Yes, but police officers deal with that possibility every day.”

“A bullet you can survive. You may not survive *me*.”

He tugged on the chain connecting her arms. “C’mon.”

“Give me a minute to get dressed.” The shackles popped open, to Simmons’ mortification. “I’m not driving across the border in my pajamas.”

He’d hooked the handcuffs to his belt before she straddled the windowsill, wearing jeans, leather boots, a purple sweatshirt and parka. Mutely, they crossed the frosty grass to where his black Ford Escape had acquired a layer of ice on the windshield. She waited on the passenger seat while he futilely scraped every surface.

“At least, I can trust you,” he remarked, finally climbing behind the wheel.

“You’ve lived how many years, and you still believe...”

“You’ve lived so few, and you’re already jaded?”

“If you’d seen what I’ve seen, you wouldn’t ask that question.”

“It’s a long drive north, Miss Mustang. Tell me.”

“Stop calling me that, and I might.”

“Deal.”

“One condition: your story first. You’re not Canada-born.”

“You mean, because I don’t talk like those idiot MacKenzie Brothers?” Mustang snickered. “Partly.”

“Fair enough. I’m from Yonkers, originally. My mother was Italian, my father a European hodge-podge. Too poor to afford college, I became a cop, rather than own a deli or work on some dull assembly line.”

“A cop in New York?”

“Over fifteen years, made it to detective. Then, a drug dealer drew his pistol on me, and I killed him. I’m locked on a psych ward two days later with a nervous breakdown.”

The teen bristled on the leather upholstery. Wilfrid Bailey/Jonas Fairchild had told her of his own nervous breakdown, after he’d slaughtered three students with a cast saw. Was this another mentally unstable individual, literally taking her for a ride?

“I’d shot other suspects, and never thought twice about it,” he continued. “After months in a padded cell, the chief approved my early retirement. My wife wasn’t happy.”

“Wife?”

“She’d piloted puddle-jumpers around the Canadian provinces for years before we met. A sweet, feisty gal, in New York on vacation. Got her purse stolen. A week later, we were married.”

“And she’s the reason you moved to Alberta?”

“She had family there, and my shrink thought the open air would help me shake off the effects of... what happened.”

“How’d you hook up with the Mounties?”

“A string of arsons in the town where we lived. When the investigators learned my background, they brought me on as a consultant and, later, convinced me to sign a contract. My wife wasn’t happy.”

“I can imagine.”

“I didn’t push it until she died. There are days I work 24 hours now, because I don’t have any reason to go home.”

“How’d she die?”

“Engines conked out on her plane and she crashed in a lake.”

“Wow. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. She loved what she did, and died doing what she loved. Can’t ask for more.”

Knowing it was her turn, Mustang exhaled deeply.

“What’s the dirt on that lightning trick?”

If Simmons already assumed he knew the answer, could she not play to his assumptions?

“A good magician never reveals his secrets,” she stated.

He jammed on the brakes so violently, they both jolted forward in their seats. "I knew it!" he stormed. "You *are* the ring leader!"

"What the hell..."

He extracted a folded sheet of paper from his inside pocket, thrusting it at her. "Our lone clue."

She smoothed the photocopy of a hand-written note. "I've got the money, and you've got squat." It was signed, "The Magician."

"You think I wrote this?" she demanded.

"You see yourself as a magician."

"No. *You* see me as this magician. I'm just a kid who's seen more of life than most."

"How? Your parents aren't wealthy. No records exist of plane tickets - in your name or theirs - except that one to Scotland your grandmother purchased before her death."

"My parents, Sergeant, choose when to pay attention to my activities, and it's only when their social standing might be adversely affected. The rest of the time, I'm on my own, and I've made some horrendous blunders."

"Robbing banks, for instance?"

"If I need money, I have honest means of obtaining it. Besides, I don't drive."

"Neither does the Magician. She's always been seen in the passenger seat of the getaway car."

"Can you be sure? You mentioned no two people have described her the same."

"She's a master of disguise."

"And a scientific whiz?" scoffed Mustang. "Better you look to the tellers who claim they're being robbed. It might be a simple case of embezzlement."

"Before the pattern developed, we considered as much."

"What pattern?"

"The banks have been robbed on what are federal holidays in the States, or days scheduled off by various Montana secondary schools or colleges."

"You mean, like spring break?"

"Exactly. The University of Montana had spring break two weeks ago. Three banks in towns close to the border were hit in that period."

"Two weeks ago, I had no time off."

"You don't act alone. You could have sent your associates..."

Frustrated, Mustang scowled. "Oh, drive!"

"I will, once I decide whether to cuff you."

“They won’t hold me.”

Simmons sagged against the cushions. “If you were guilty, you wouldn’t have come with me so willingly. Still, you’re guilty of something. I’ve always been able to sense a person’s guilty conscience.”

“Which is why you targeted me at the school?”

“Which is why I deliberately positioned myself in front of you and forced the collision yesterday. I wanted to see how you reacted to being close to a cop.”

“I’ve been close to a lot of cops. They tend to tick me off.”

“Resentment for law enforcement,” he chuckled. “I’ll remember that.”

“Won’t help, if you’re dead.”

“Are you threatening me?” A serious inquiry.

“No, Sergeant. You said it yourself: I’ve left a slew of bodies in my wake. Demolished buildings and charred wood, too. Best you take me home and hunt for your crooks elsewhere.”

“If you have such skills, you could help us find...”

She tired of the debate. “Drive, please. North or south, I don’t care. I’m going to get some shut-eye.”

Simmons’ shoe moved from the brake pedal to the accelerator and, when Mustang awoke, the sun was rising to her right. The amount of snow on the fields near the highway confirmed the Ford traveled north.

“How much longer?”

“Ten minutes or so.”

“To Edmonton?”

“No, my house. We both need to freshen up and eat before starting the day’s toil.”

“Good idea.”

Cal Simmons owned a run-down, red brick bungalow in a tiny village southeast of Alberta’s capital. Directly behind, a spacious barn sat open and empty, aircraft parts scattered around the floor. A concrete landing strip had been poured, as well - Mrs. Simmons’ own private airport.

Fast food containers and bags littered the kitchen table; dirty dishes filled the sink. Mustang observed a tangible change in Simmons’ personality within the structure: an almost debilitating depression.

No wonder he worked long shifts. Too many memories of fleeting happiness here, compounding his grief.

“If I’m going to cook, I’ll need to clean up,” she hinted.

“I... used to have a woman come once a week. I was never home to appreciate her efforts, so I let her go.”

The refrigerator contained spoiled milk and moldy leftovers. “Where’s the nearest grocery store?”

“Two blocks west,” Simmons yawned. He tossed his wallet toward her; it fell short. “Help yourself.”

Not much help - two Canadian fives and a ten.

She located a box of trash bags in a drawer, and began dumping items wholesale. The tiny domicile reminded her of the Gate Lodge at Boleskine, where Jack Parsons had spent his final days. Men could live in such hovels. Without the great outdoors, Mustang would go mad.

The store was a mom-and-pop operation, where buying the basics quickly ate up the \$20. Carrying a paper sack along the dusty street, she was greeted cheerily by a woman jogging with her dog, a man out to fetch the newspaper, and two children constructing a snowman.

Not something she experienced in Montana.

A cast iron skillet served for cooking eggs and bacon. The toaster, fortunately, didn’t burn the bread. A tall glass of orange juice completed the meal. Which she ate alone.

Simmons had fallen asleep on the tattered living room sofa.

The two bedrooms were surprisingly clean, Mustang discovered, during a search for the bathroom. Probably because he never used either. The couple must’ve never had children, because the guest room’s decor bore no remnants of youngsters. Nor did any family portraits dot the walls.

She dozed in a recliner near a non-functional television, roused only when Simmons rolled off the sofa and hit the bare floor with a thud. Both required a few moments to recall their surroundings, then nodded to each other.

“What time is it?” Simmons growled.

“Noon-ish, I’d think.”

“Damn!”

“You in a rush?”

“When we crossed the border, I told the boys to call ahead and leave the captain a voice mail we’d roll in around nine.”

“Maybe he’ll think my supposed gang mounted a rescue attempt.”

“He thought I was crazy to head south at all. Set things up just to get me out of his hair.”

Mustang recalled her resolution of the previous afternoon. “A lot of that going around.”

Simmons glanced at her curiously.

She shrugged, rose and stretched. “How do you like your eggs?”

“Up, but not too runny.”

“Two or three?”

“Three.”

As she waited for the electric range to warm up, she heard the shower engage. She would’ve liked a long bath, herself, except for having no extra clothes.

“You’ll make someone a good wife, someday,” came the compliment as her host wolfed down the food.

“Not if I have my way.”

“Smart girl.”

“Eh?” she queried.

“Marriage is overrated. Two people grow so close, when one’s gone, the other is left an empty shell. Not even any kids to occupy the off-hours...”

“Why not?” A natural question, though inappropriate under the circumstances, Mustang realized too late.

“June loved to fly. If she got pregnant, she would’ve had to give it up. I couldn’t rob her of what she loved.”

The discussion ended there; the phone silenced them both.

Mustang could hear the caller through the earpiece, even across the kitchen. “Simmons, why the hell are you there, instead of here?” the man barked.

“We’re on our way, boss. Miss... Duryea needed a break after the drive.”

“You giving a bank robber privileges?”

“She’s... not the bank robber, boss.”

The Mountie’s voice grew louder. “What?”

“She’s our bait to catch them.”

III

Slumping on a metal kitchen chair, Mustang’s jaw dropped. “What?” she bellowed.

Simmons waved off her reaction, concentrating on the phone.

“You’d better be here in an hour, or you’ll be fishing... permanently!” directed his boss.

The exchange ended with a resounding click.

“Sorry about that,” Simmons grinned, replacing the receiver in its cradle.

“You’re out of your mind!” raged Mustang. “You’re going to *use* me to catch the bank robbers?”

“I believe it’s possible.”

“Mind telling me how?”

“We publicize we’ve brought an expert in magic from the States to consult on the crimes. We announce we’re staking out three or four specific banks along the border on the next school holiday. We supposedly leave one they haven’t hit unguarded, replacing the regular tellers with our own people...”

“It won’t work.”

“How can you be so certain?”

“If the ring leader *is* a science geek, and they *do* have specialized equipment, don’t you think they’ll have cased the joints beforehand? They’d know in an instant if personnel had been switched, and suspend their operations.”

“You think an awful lot like a criminal, Miss Mustang.”

“Just because I think logically?”

“Many people think logically - accountants, physicians, lawyers. You... you’re different. You focus in a direction most honest people never consider.”

Dejected, the teen buried her face in her hands. “Only because I’ve... acted impulsively, then needed logic to repair the damage.”

“Robbing banks is very impulsive. Being able to cover your tracks so thoroughly is very logical.”

The floor shifted ominously as Mustang struggled to contain her anger. A crack originated in the plaster and ascended to the ceiling. Beyond rain-spotted windows, a microburst of wind whipped trees double along the quiet street.

“All right! All right!” Simmons conceded, retreating toward the door.

“Forget the plan! I’ll take you home tonight!”

Immediately, the reaction ceased. The fissure in the wall repaired itself, and silence reigned.

“You put on some show when you’re pissed,” commented the sergeant.

She sighed, “The meteorologist’s love a good mystery.”

“We’d better get going.”

“Okay.”

He glanced around the kitchen. “Thanks for cleaning.”

“I... wish I could do more for you.”

“Why?”

“Hard to explain. Two of the men who’ve died... at least they achieved a degree of contentment before...”

A cloud passed over his rugged features as he reached for the doorknob.

“This... is a hell of my own creation. Someday, I’ll... fix it.”

“Make it soon.”

Driving in silence to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police provincial headquarters in Edmonton, Mustang observed Simmons' subtly reclaim his purpose for living. A completely confident detective strode into the modern complex, greeted warmly by fellow officers.

Except the captain of the investigative unit.

Florid and overweight from years occupying a desk, the white-maned administrator was livid when Simmons paused to knock at the glass door.

"Cal! It's about time!" he shouted. "Get your ass in here!"

Simmons wrapped his arm protectively around the teen's shoulders as he ushered her into the cluttered room. "Mustang Duryea, this is Todd Armbruster."

"I suppose it's nice to meet you, Miss," rumbled the captain. "Please, have a seat, and pay us no mind if we argue like an old married couple."

Settled on a comfortable chair positioned against the wall, Mustang suppressed her smile as Armbruster laid into Simmons with a vengeance. Accusations included wasting departmental funds on an uncontrolled obsession with weather phenomenon, and exceeding his authority.

Simmons waited out the fury, obviously having been subjected to it many times in the past. "Boss," he finally said. "With this girl's assistance, we'll have the case solved by tomorrow."

"What, she one of those psychics who can read the robbers' minds?" scoffed Armbruster.

"No, better than that. She's young, and she knows how young people think."

"Crap, Cal, you could've brought in any local kid to do that."

"Mustang has... unique talents."

Simmons and Mustang were scrutinized antagonistically, then the captain flopped so hard on his swivel chair, the springs creaked. "Just because she resembles your wife, and you haven't been laid in years..."

The implication of that statement incensed Mustang. She shot off the cushions; Simmons restrained her from hurdling the desk and throttling Armbruster.

"You want to risk your pension for this... slut?" he persisted.

"Watch your mouth, buddy," she hissed, reaching toward him. "You're risking more than a stupid pension."

The scene was interrupted by a lieutenant, hesitant to speak.

"What is it, Bob?" snorted Armbruster.

"A copy of the security camera footage from the latest robbery." A DVD disk was laid on the blotter and the youthful officer retreated quickly.

His complexion still red, and Mustang still ready to call down the ceiling on his head, Armbruster turned to a small television, activating the built-in player. Three sets of eyes watched the screen light up with scenes of an empty, rustic lobby. Nothing moved, no one entered or exited, the tellers never moved for ninety seconds.

“That’s a big help,” spat the captain, snatching the remote.

Mustang pitied the man’s blindness. “You didn’t see it?”

“See what?” prodded Simmons.

“The time and date in the corner.”

“What about it?”

“Play it again.”

“Don’t waste our time, girly,” Armbruster protested.

Simmons snapped, “Just do it, Todd!”

Reversing to the beginning of the clip, the detectives focused on the bottom right of the screen, which read Wednesday, April 1, 10:42:33 AM.

“So?” Armbruster breathed.

Simmons recognized the discrepancy. “It’s a still shot. A freeze-frame.”

“Exactly,” praised Mustang.

“But, how?”

“You were the one who announced the robbers have scientific know-how. I wouldn’t go that far, but they do have a computer geek on their crew.”

Armbruster echoed, “A geek?”

“Has to be. In this age where schools give their students laptop computers - so the teachers don’t have to read lousy, hand-written homework - kids can do phenomenal things before they’re ten years old. It wouldn’t take much for some bored sophomore to break through the security firewall and pause the cameras for the duration of the robbery.”

“Like you?”

“I hate computers. Don’t even have an e-mail account.”

After the bank camera footage, video depositions from four staff members. Each recounted how they heard a loud explosion outside the building and, while they were distracted, a woman and two men - dressed in black - presented themselves, brandishing pistols.

“It was like the transporter from *Star Trek*,” noted the middle-aged manager. “The robbers materialized in a flash, near the teller cages. The outer doors never opened...”

Within seconds, the crooks emptied cash drawers and, the employees’ attention diverted by screaming outside, the culprits vanished.

Calmer now, Armbruster switched off the television and faced Simmons. “Consistent with the other incidents, anyway.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about this?” Mustang asked.

“None of the details were released. We didn’t want a rash of copy-cat crimes.”

“All the robberies start with an explosion, and end with...”

“The first two were cars backfiring,” interjected Simmons. “The noises have gotten louder with each subsequent hit.”

“This magician knows how to perform an illusion.”

“Meaning what, exactly?” Armbruster barked.

“If you think about it, you know, yourself. The first technique any would-be magician learns is to draw his audience’s eyes away from the deception.”

Simmons confirmed, “She’s right.”

“Of course, I’m right.”

“But, what does that get us?” the captain snarled.

“A break down of equipment the criminals use, and who’s their team.”

“You *know* these people?”

“Not at all. I know a lot like them, though. The geek’s in the first car, with a laptop and wireless internet access.”

“The first car?”

“Sure. There have to be two. The first is small and blends in with others in the parking lot or on the street. The second would be an SUV, with large stereo speakers in the back, turned so they can blast sounds through the rear window.”

“Makes sense,” agreed Simmons, after a moment’s thought.

Armbruster countered, “What doesn’t make sense is why they’re wasting their energy on such small banks...”

“Each bank has been larger than the last,” Simmons supplied.

“And the next will be, too, until they perfect their methods and go after their real targets,” related Mustang.

“Which would be?”

“Banks in the States. You’re right about the gang running south after each robbery, but not because they’re Americans. They’re spending a lot of time casing locations in Montana and, probably, elsewhere, before coming back home to work out more bugs from the system.”

Armbruster was glaring at her again, suspicions newly aroused. “How do you know so much about this crap?”

“She’s a smart kid,” Simmons replied proudly.

“Too smart, I’m thinking. Maybe we should lock her up for a few days, and see if these robberies stop.”

“Boss, I wouldn’t...”

“Why not, Cal? My original premise hold true? You want her for yourself?”

“I’m old enough to be her grandfather.”

“And too old to be a cop anymore, I’m thinking. You’ve lost your objectivity.”

“You gonna suspend me?”

“No. Not yet. I am going to hold your friend here, however, until you flush out these robbers. Maybe knowing she’s pacing a twelve-by-six cell will motivate you.”

“You’re a heartless bastard,” Simmons groaned.

Mustang concurred. “A dead, heartless bastard.”

Armbruster grabbed her parka hood and dragged her close. “What was that?”

“You put me behind bars, and the bars will strangle you.”

Something in her tone startled the chief, and he spun toward Simmons. “Who the hell is this bitch?”

“I haven’t quite figured that out, boss. If I were you, I’d apologize and cut her loose.”

“And watch her prance across the border to rob more banks?”

Dejected by the stupidity of some people, Mustang shook off Armbruster’s grip and made a leisurely exit. The junior detectives’ expressions as she passed their desks made it unnecessary for her to glance back at the chief, on the threshold, weapon raised.

The pistol melted in his hand.

Simmons caught up to Mustang at the elevator. “Thanks for pissing him off.”

“He pissed *me* off. That’s a dangerous chance to take.”

“He... understands that now.” The lift doors parted, and they stepped inside. “Will you help me track the robbers?”

“I’m no cop.”

“You ought to be. You have a very... logical mind.”

“We’re back to that, eh?”

“We’ve been viewing those security clips for weeks, and never noticed the time. We’d overestimated their capabilities...”

“No, you didn’t. They’re good, this crew. You should start with colleges near the towns being robbed. Check student records for high grades, little extracurricular activity, and car ownership. Should take fifteen minutes with a good computer.”

“If you hate computers, how do you know so much about them?”

“Movies and TV.” She disembarked on the ground floor, blocking Simmons’ path. “You’d better get on it.”

“What about you?”

“I’m heading home.”

“What? Hitchhiking? You left home without any money or clothes, no passport and no drivers license...”

She grinned mysteriously as the panels closed.

On the street, a cold wind whistled between tall structures, and her stomach grumbled. Proud of herself, nonetheless, she hadn’t caused any major disasters since this ordeal began. Maybe she would eventually be able to subdue her powers and her imprudent tongue.

She didn’t notice a florid Mountie monitoring her progress along dusky sidewalks from his office window, nor could she hear the embittered diatribe directed at his subordinate.

It did bother her Armbruster assumed Simmons’ sole interest in her involved sex. She’d never be able to figure out men - which was why she would never marry. Mix a male’s disjointed mental processes and her volatile powers: a recipe for tragedy.

So immersed in her own internal deliberations, Mustang completely ignored the police vehicles tracking her route. She had no reason to fear, regardless, since handcuffs could not bind her, nor walls confine her.

A bullet could wound her, as she’d experienced in Assisi, Italy, when the demented Brother Luigi fired upon St. Francis.

That is, if she didn’t first stop the projectile from leaving the barrel.

Every Mounties’ sidearm and rifle was rendered useless - the officers totally oblivious - until Mustang Duryea strolled beyond the Edmonton city limits.

IV

Clouds gathered, obscuring the sunset, and large flakes swirled through the countryside.

The Ford Escape pulled alongside Mustang as she hiked along a snow-packed country road. She ignored the vehicle, trudging valiantly on, hoping to find a secluded spot to summon a lightning bolt.

The passenger side window descended electronically. "You keep going in this direction," warned Cal Simmons, "and you'll end up in Vancouver by month's end."

The auburn-haired teen maintained her gait.

"Don't be a fool, Mustang. Get in the car."

"I make a habit of being foolish," she grunted.

"While me and the boss were battling it out, a report came over the radio about an SUV and late-model Hyundai with Ontario plates which have been parked in a hotel lot near Orion since yesterday. Fits the M.O."

"Is their bank larger than the last one hit?"

"Twice as large. Nine employees."

She surrendered to the inevitable and slung herself onto the bucket seat.

"Let's go."

No more had the door slammed, than the locks activated and Todd Armbruster hoisted himself off the rear seat and wedged his semi-automatic pistol against her skull.

"You move one millimeter, and you're dead," he drawled.

Simmons pressed the accelerator while spinning the steering wheel sharply left. The U-turn knocked Mustang sideways; she bumped her head on the glass.

"Watch it, will you?"

"Sorry," the driver lamented. "Sorry about everything, for that matter. It was this, or turn in my badge."

"What about Orion?"

"We'll be there before your gang can pull off their latest heist," declared the detective chief. "Then, you can share cells in the provincial prison."

No sense arguing with stubbornness, Mustang decided. The only way to prove Armbruster wrong would be to have him witness the real culprits in action - without her.

She relaxed and let the heat blowing from dash vents warm her chilled bones.

"Did you have your assistant make the reservations?" asked Simmons.

Armbruster replied, "I told her before I left. She's been so engrossed in her wedding plans, though, there's no guarantee she'll remember."

"That's why everybody in the department has been writing notes and sticking them on her computer screen. Otherwise, she forgets."

“Somebody should’ve remembered to tell me.”

“Why do we need reservations?” pondered Mustang.

“The bank doesn’t open until Monday morning. We’re required to keep our suspects, informants, or whatever you want to call yourself, comfortable. That means reserving a room at the local hotel.”

“A room? As in one room?”

“Look, you...” the chief paused to rephrase his insult. “When it comes to holding someone in custody, we don’t stand on propriety. There should be two beds in the room: one for you, and one for whoever isn’t on duty making sure you don’t sneak out in the middle of the night.”

“You expect me to sleep with someone sitting around staring at me?” snorted the teen.

“I don’t really give a damn if you sleep or not. I’m obligated to follow procedures.”

Simmons patted Mustang’s hand gently. “It’ll be okay. If we have to hang a blanket across the room, you’ll have your privacy.”

“That’s not the point, Sarge. I’m not involved in these robberies, and yet I’m being dragged hither and yon, and treated like a... like a...”

Simmons glanced at his boss in the back, mutely silencing him from speaking the derogatory words.

“It’ll all be over Monday morning, and you’ll be on your way home,” the detective stated. “I promise.”

“Can you promise the principal won’t chew my ass and kick me back with the juniors?”

“If I need to, I’ll vouch for any absences.”

Knowing the attitude of the administrators and teachers at Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High, Mustang doubted even a letter from the Canadian prime minister would be accepted as an excuse. Because she had been... less than a model student, they wished her to fail.

Morosely, she shifted on the upholstery and gazed at the night-shrouded landscape speeding past.

A late dinner was in order when the trio arrived in the modest town on the leading edge of a blizzard. Mustang’s greatest concern was not the weapon Todd Armbruster had finally restored to its holster, but getting home in time to catch the bus for school Monday morning.

In a cozy diner on Orion’s main street, they ordered sandwiches and sodas. Three other tables were occupied, including the largest, where five men and a rather plain woman laughed and joked loudly.

Simmons and Armbruster prattled about mundane police events, which didn't interest Mustang. The group in the corner did. She couldn't distinguish their exact conversation, but something wasn't right.

"Sarge," the teen whispered after their food was served by a perky, ebony-haired waitress.

"What? You get the wrong order?"

"No. Check out the gang at the round table."

Simmons gave them a cursory glance before biting into his hamburger.

"So?"

"Don't they strike you as odd?"

Armbruster caught the question and shifted on the booth bench to peruse the group, halting his motion when Mustang grabbed his arm.

"Don't!" she admonished.

"Why not?"

Sipping from his cup to look nonchalant, Simmons concurred. "They're the bank robbers."

"What makes you think so?" prodded the chief.

Mustang answered, "Four athletes, a geek, and a magician?"

"How do you know she's a magician?"

"She's practicing sleight of hand while they talk."

"Sleight of hand?"

"She's got a coin - one of your Canadian dollars, maybe - and she's doing passes, and pretending to make it disappear."

"At least, we know the lead was solid," mumbled Simmons.

Armbruster added, "All we have to do is wait for them to visit the bank."

"Better take them now," Mustang ventured.

"Why? We've got nothing on them..."

"You want someone to get shot?"

"No, but..."

Mustang dropped her paper napkin on the checkered tablecloth and rose. "Leave this to me."

Simmons clutched a fistful of her sweatshirt sleeve. "Are you crazy? They're armed..."

She smirked at the aging detective. "So am I."

Strolling away, Mustang overheard Armbruster reprimand his subordinate.

"You gave her a gun?"

"No, boss. What she's armed with doesn't fire bullets."

Without overtly watching, the two men maintained a view of the confrontation - Simmons over the chief's shoulder, and Armbruster via the reflection in a nearby window.

While feigning interest in the juke box's song list, Mustang glanced at the ring leader, deftly manipulating the coin. She dropped it abruptly, though, when all the water glasses at the table suddenly drained.

Three of the athletes bent under the table to check for hoses. The geek picked up one of the tumblers and inspected its composition. The woman whipped her head toward Mustang.

"What's the big idea?" she puzzled.

"Sorry. Couldn't resist greeting a fellow illusionist."

"How'd you do it?"

Mustang smiled and shrugged.

"How long you been into magic?" wondered the woman.

"A couple years."

"You couldn't have found that trick in a book."

"No, I... knew someone."

"Whoever he was, he was damned good."

The men were bored by the pleasantries, and the geek - bespectacled and scruffy - interrupted, "C'mon, Ginny, we've got to iron out the details..."

"Plenty of time," she retorted. "I seldom find someone on my own level when it comes to magic." A chair was commandeered from a nearby table. "Sit, please."

"I'm... with friends," objected Mustang.

"Just for a minute. I'm Ginny Rosenfeld, and these are... friends from school."

"School?"

"University of Ontario."

"Soccer players?"

The woman grinned. "Soccer, wrestling... and Andy's the best hacker in the northern hemisphere."

Andy flushed angrily. "Shut up, Ginny."

"Magicians know how to keep secrets, Andy. As for..."

"Lizzy," Mustang stated, the taste of the name she hated fouling her tongue.

"You in school, Lizzy?"

"School's a waste." No lie, there.

Suspiciously, Andy queried, “You... looking for some fast cash from those guys in the booth?”

“Not likely. They’re cops.”

Six bodies stiffened instantly, and Mustang bit back her laughter.

“Cops?” Ginny gulped. “You said they were friends.”

“Fathers of friends. My friends - their daughters - were supposed to meet us here, but the snow must’ve delayed them. We’re supposed to go skiing.”

The waitress approached the table; Ginny hid her face behind the menu, effectively dismissing Mustang.

The teen would not be dismissed so easily. She leaned toward the frumpy brunette and murmured, “Bet you can’t dodge a bullet.”

Ginny caught the double meaning, and Mustang knew it. She didn’t have to see the silver 9mm pistol drawn from the magician’s purse.

“Can you?” Ginny growled.

Mustang backed from the table, no fear clouding her judgment. The other patrons, conversely, panicked at the sight of the gun, and tripped over the tables and each other in a futile attempt to escape.

Todd Armbruster raised his bulk from the booth and flashed his badge. “Everybody remain calm and stay put.”

While the bystanders complied, Mustang retreated to the diner’s counter, some twenty feet from where Ginny stood, weapon leveled.

“This is no prop pistol,” the magician proclaimed, “and I don’t use blanks.”

“The only thing blank is your brain,” commented Mustang. “You could’ve used your talents constructively. Instead you’ve become a common crook.”

“Uncommon,” Andy asserted, standing beside Ginny. “No one’s ever done what we’ve done.”

“Thousands have and are in prison. You’re nothing special...”

Ginny spat, “And you are?”

The pistol’s discharge created a narrow plume of smoke, but what the witnesses recalled after the fact was Cal Simmons lunging in front of Mustang, taking the bullet square in the chest.

Mounties from the local district handcuffed the suspects, while Mustang squatted beside the former New York detective.

“Damn, Sarge, why’d you do that?” she queried, holding a kitchen towel the cook tossed to her over Simmons’ wound.

“Silly girl. Why’d you want to die?”

“Most magicians can’t dodge bullets, but I can *stop* them. If you hadn’t... done this, the slug would’ve landed harmlessly on the floor.”

“At least, they won’t be robbing any more banks.” He weakly squeezed her hand. “You *do* remind me of my wife. She was so beautiful.”

Armbruster broke from supervising the chaos to check on his comrade. “Ambulance is on the way, Cal. You gonna make it?”

Simmons didn’t have strength to answer, and Mustang grasped she would have to work quickly - and publicly - to heal him.

Cal Simmons took his last breath before she could call upon the natural forces.

When the chief pronounced him dead, having checked his pulse at three different points, Mustang sank on her heels and wept. Once again, her own impulsiveness - pushing the criminals to implicate themselves - cost a man’s life.

Would she ever learn?

With uncharacteristic tenderness, Armbruster lifted Mustang off the floor. “C’mon. I’ll take you home.”

“All the way to Helena?” she stammered.

“Sure. Cal had faith in you, and I owe it to him, because I should’ve had more faith in *him*.”

“Aren’t you ticked at me for...”

“Frankly, you did a dumb thing, but it worked. You ever considered becoming a cop?”

“Not in a million years.”

Near to midnight before the crime scene emptied and the diner’s owner could lock the doors, the cross-border trek would not take place in the dark, especially with a layer of fresh snow on the roads. Armbruster opted to make use of the hotel reservation, without the need to post a guard over Mustang’s sleeping form.

He collapsed on one of the double beds. She propped the pillows on the other, and stared at the ceiling.

“How long did you know Cal Simmons?” she inquired, unsure if the bulky, prone form remained awake.

Exhaustion commingled with tension prevented the chief from relaxing, as it did her. “He came to Alberta fourteen years ago. Content to keep the books for his wife’s little enterprise, until I managed to rope him back into the ranks.”

“He told you what happened in New York?”

“Sure. Up front and honest about it, which I admired. Anybody who’s been a cop can understand. There are some nuts on the force who enjoy carrying a gun and killing people, but most regret firing their weapon for the rest of their lives.”

Armbruster rolled onto his left side, facing Mustang. “He was an asset to the department until June died.”

“His grief?”

“Got the better of him. He became a workaholic, and his faculties declined as his depression increased. I tried to convince him to get some professional help, but he flashed a brave face and took on longer and longer shifts. Some days, we couldn’t get him to eat, much less go home.”

“He... let the house go.”

“I advised him to sell it; that much property would’ve brought enough for him to retire. He thought it would be disrespectful to June’s memory. But those very memories prevented him from walking through the front door.”

“So sad.”

“His fixation with you was kind of sad, really,” muttered the chief.

“Fixation?”

“Shortly after he bumped into you on Thursday, he called me. I thought he’d gone over the edge. He wanted you to be the Magician. He’d been hung up on those meteorological reports, which he claimed pointed to the Helena area, and then you were acting so weird...”

“Weird? He set fire to part of my father’s ranch!”

“To make you incriminate yourself.”

“I knew it!”

“It worked. Whatever you did convinced him beyond a shadow of a doubt...”

“I saw it in his eyes, and I tried to dissuade him. His obsession ended up killing him.”

Armbruster yawned. “You have no reason to feel guilty.”

“If I hadn’t been showing off at the restaurant, he wouldn’t have tried to protect me.”

“Like I said: it was stupid, but it worked. Losing a man was unfortunate, but expected in our line of work.”

Once again, Mustang realized she might never gain an understanding of how a man’s mind functioned. Senseless death bothered her; why did it not shake the chief to his very core?

She stretched out on the mattress and tucked the blanket up to her chin. Already, Armbruster was snoring quietly.

Following Sunday’s lengthy drive south, Mustang managed to get a few hours’ sleep before the alarm clock jarred her from bed. In so many ways, she wished the weekend’s events had only been a dream.

No such luck, and she held out little hope of her life being more than an ongoing nightmare for the foreseeable future.