

The Mustang Chronicles:

Marathon Mustang

A Novella

by

Eugenia Lucas

I

“What a stupid idea,” grumbled Elizabeth “Mustang” Duryea, tossing the Helena newspaper’s Friday edition on the kitchen table.

“What’s that, dear?” queried her mother, preoccupied with scrubbing a skillet at the sink.

“Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High is holding a marathon to raise funds for new science labs.” Concocted by the school’s principal, the notion caught fire among the student body when rumors circulated that the career counselor knew somebody who knew somebody who could get the race listed as a qualifying event for the Boston Marathon.

The article Mustang just read claimed over 10,000 people were registered, the route taking them past the Duryea home at mile 20, midmorning on Saturday.

The sheriff had approached Joe Duryea about using part of the property as a check point, offering water and first aid. Even more of a disruption, and Mustang didn’t appreciate disruptions to her already chaotic life.

No matter the reason for the fundraiser lay squarely on her shoulders. An accidental explosion during chemistry class earlier that semester - unrelated to any mixture of volatile liquids - had wiped out much of the structure’s science wing.

With a grunt, she trudged to her bedroom, hoping to find an old movie on TV.

Pre-dawn brought with it vibrations of trucks and diesel exhaust odors. Mustang reluctantly rose when her father knocked, requesting assistance.

“I’ll meet you at the bunkhouse in ten minutes,” he directed.

“Sure, Dad.”

No time for a shower, to be sure. She jerked long auburn locks into a pony tail, buttoned on a blue flannel shirt and slipped her feet into work boots after fastening the stained jeans.

Chilly, she realized, foregoing a coat as she rushed out the front door of the ranch-style brick dwelling.

Good running weather.

Though they couldn’t hear the starter’s gun at precisely 8:00 AM, a flurry of activity preceding the fastest group warned of their arrival. Police vehicles, lights flashing but sirens silenced - thankfully - cleared sparse traffic from the roads. Two ambulances had parked near a hastily-erected white tent, where pallets of water bottles awaited the thirsty.

As soon as she could, Mustang withdrew from the fray. She had no interest in this type of sport. A hot bowl of oatmeal and two slices of toast warmed her

back at the house, and she opted to settle under the patchwork quilt and make up for lost sleep.

A sharp increase in noise piqued her curiosity soon enough. That, and boredom - all the ranch hands diverted from their regular routine on this occasion - caused her to meander across the lawns to the rise where, a seeming lifetime ago in her mind, a lightning bolt had transported her from Scotland.

Thanks to Jack Parsons, who had transferred his power over nature to her at the moment she'd unwittingly thrust a dagger into his chest.

A curse or a blessing... more likely the first.

The lightning's point of impact still showed as charred earth; no grass had grown on the scorched soil.

From this vantage point, Mustang detected flocks of runners, and smelled their commingled perspiration. The sun shone brightly over rolling hills, but those racing for the best time in their category enjoyed the shade of tree-lined asphalt.

She didn't notice one competitor pause and gaze up at her, an awed expression momentarily eradicating pain from his taut features. As he resumed his pace, his eyes never left her until a curve obstructed his view.

The last stragglers, determined to finish the course but suffering either from bad knees or other ailments, vanished around noon. Volunteers dismantled the tent, packed leftover supplies and made their way back to Canyon Creek. Lunch proved a strained affair, Joe complaining about damage to grass and gravel, which he could not claim on insurance.

Mustang excused herself and shuffled to the barn, saddling her pinto, Heartbeat, intent on a long, relaxing ride around the sprawling acreage. Instead, a white Subaru Forrester bumping up the drive halted her in her tracks.

"You lost?" she asked when the driver's side window descended.

His hair grey straw, pale features drawn with exertion, she recognized the purple t-shirt bearing a logo designed by one of the senior art students at the school. "Is there a way to get to the hill overlooking the road?" the marathoner countered.

"A lot of hills around here are visible from the road. Which one?"

"I... never mind." The window closed, a hard right kicked up dirt as the car departed.

"Weird," muttered Mustang, continuing on her way.

Weirder still when, Heartbeat cantering across open pasture, she glimpsed the same vehicle parked on a service trail an hour later.

"Oh, hell," escaped her lips, wondering what she'd done to attract unwanted attention.

Tugging the reins, she steered her mount toward where she'd stood that morning. And, her suspicions confirmed, the trespasser groped on the ground for evidence of... what?

"This is private property, Mister," Mustang warned. "You've no permission..."

He glanced up at her, a swift retort dying in his throat. He dropped to his knees, and began uttering prayers aloud.

"What the hell..." the teen sniffed, swinging from the saddle.

"Oh, Blessed Virgin, who deigned appear to me in this holy vision..."

She couldn't believe her ears. Reaching, she clasped his interlaced fingers to raise him upright and found her hands suddenly peppered with devout kisses.

A rattlesnake bite wouldn't have caused her to retract the digits more quickly. "Get hold of yourself, man!" she cried.

When he resisted, she slapped his bony cheek - hard.

As if wakened from a dream, he sucked air deeply, then exhaled. Slowly, he climbed to his feet. "I..."

"Who are you?" demanded Mustang.

"My name is Stephen Jamison," he breathed.

"Well, Mr. Jamison, I think your brain is blood-deprived after the marathon. Just what did you think happened?"

"On this very spot, I saw it while passing. The Blessed Mother, bathed in holy light... I had to come back... to find her again..."

"Blessed Mother? Whose mother?"

"Mary, mother of Jesus Christ. I'm a Catholic priest, stationed at a mission on the Navajo Reservation in Arizona. Since my seminary days, I've been running, and I found out it's possible to raise money for our parish programs running marathons. This time around, the pledges totaled \$50,000. What a boost, though, to have a vision of the Blessed Mother! Mention of that in our appeal letters will double our income!"

Mustang seized his shoulders and shook him. "Look, Father. You had no vision. What you saw was a trick of the sunlight..."

He shook free. "No! It was an aura of holiness surrounding the most beautiful woman I've ever seen..."

How to convince him? she puzzled. If she used her power to manifest some... miracle, he would never be swayed from his conviction. It would only reinforce his belief that she was this Blessed Mother of Christ...

Just as the Franciscan, Br. Luigi, had thought her an angel, when she'd traveled to Rome during those first, frustrating days dealing with Parsons' unwelcome gift.

Touching, though, to be deemed the "most beautiful woman" he'd seen.

Then again, as a priest, he wasn't supposed to be worried about beautiful women, if she remembered correctly from her world religion class.

And she certainly didn't qualify as "holy".

She might project an aura, detectable by those with specific psychic inclinations...

"There's nothing here for you," she asserted. "Best be heading to Arizona..."

"I'm not leaving town until I see her again."

"You won't see her again."

"How can you be so positive?"

"Because no self-respecting... saint, or whatever, would pop up in these parts."

"Visions have been reported in stranger places than this: a cave in Lourdes, a field in Fatima..."

"To naive little kids, not middle-aged men in need of hip replacement."

Green eyes flashed. "How'd you know..."

"I heard bone grinding on bone when you got up," she bluffed.

"You a nurse?"

"A high school senior."

"The Blessed Mother could heal me, so I could keep on running, and raising money..."

"Isn't there a quote from the Bible somewhere, 'The poor you always have with you'?"

"Matthew's Gospel, yes."

"Whether you run or not, the people in your parish will continue in their poverty for generations to come."

"You... you... atheist!" Jamison spat.

"Does that make me a bad person?"

"No, but... you're right about no vision manifesting here. Such a lack of faith..." With that, he strode away, a slight limp confirming her diagnosis.

Returning to where Heartbeat contentedly munched spring grass, Mustang mounted the pinto and trotted in the general direction of the barn, detouring only to assure herself Stephen Jamison had, indeed, left.

She decided, if religious fervor continued to provide such a set of obstacles, she would... she would...

What?

What could she do? She couldn't rid herself of these powers on a whim, and often couldn't control them. Or, more accurately, control her thoughts and words, which triggered nature's response to her impulsive urges.

Good riddance to the likes of that priest. Rather than see beauty in the ordinary, his kind sought miracles at every turn. The skill of a surgeon far surpassed some inexplicable, miraculous healing...

Heartbeat groomed and fed fresh oats, his water trough full, Mustang strolled across the rise before veering toward smoke floating from the living room chimney. Joe liked a crackling fire to offset tense silences during dinner.

That's when a flash of sunlight glaring off the Subaru's windshield briefly blinded her. "Oh, hell," she snorted.

Jamison's determination might have been laudable in other circumstances. Not here, not now.

Sequestering herself in her bedroom after the dishes had been cleared from a meal of pork roast, mashed potatoes and creamed corn, Mustang did not emerge at all on Sunday. Her fears took concrete form on Monday morning when, as she traversed the drive to the school bus stop, she noticed lines of cars parked on the shoulder, and crowds kneeling on the hill, rosaries dangling.

Her best attempt to ignore the scene resulted in 17 flat tires and six cracked oil pans when the mob dispersed some hours later.

Stephen Jamison observed the destruction with conflicted spirit, a nervous finger loosening his Roman collar. "She can't be displeased with us," he announced to those wielding jacks and calling tow trucks on their cell phones. "It is the devil, working to prevent us from offering our petitions on this sacred ground!" When Mustang alighted from the bus that afternoon, not only had the numbers tripled, but county deputies were patrolling the road to ensure no other vandalism occurred.

Maggie Duryea waxed philosophical while cleaning the bathroom. "I guess, wherever you pray, it's a holy place."

"Geez, Mom, you're kidding, right? Isn't Dad going to put a stop to this?" her daughter objected.

"He's in town, checking options with local officials."

"Good."

"He wants to rent a tent, so the people don't get wet if it rains."

Teeth grinding, Mustang crossed the hall and slammed her bedroom door.

Night fell, and the rhythmic cadence of repeated prayers continued. The teen didn't dare wish coyotes or wolves to converge and shred these simpletons.

Staring at shadows on the ceiling, she didn't want to think at all.

Then, something rattled the window.

Stephen Jamison, knocking lightly, so as not to rouse her parents.

"What the hell do you want?" Mustang growled, raising the glass pane, her robe untied.

"The people want to see you."

"Why?"

"They believe, if you are present, the vision will..."

"You're out of your mind!" she barked. "Get lost!"

"Please..."

Every muscle tensed, Mustang resolved to end this debacle by showing the masses a vision they'd never forget.

Her mistake.

Jamison had removed the screen, and she climbed over the sill, bare feet soon soaked by the dew-covered grass. Striding purposefully to the hill, a path was created for the priest, who attempted to lead her by the hand. She wouldn't allow him to touch her.

Besides, it's tough to hold a clenched fist.

Nothing prepared hundreds of eager eyes for what took place. Lightning and thunder, accompanied by a hurricane-force microburst of wind, knocked them from their prayerful postures, followed by a pillar of flame shooting skyward from that charred section of earth, previously marked by her unexpected homecoming.

En masse, they fled, scrambling like mice chased by a cat. Mustang heard fenders bumping as drivers hurried to vacate the premises, and headlights cast eerie images on the trees.

Only Stephen Jamison remained standing, his black garments singed, an inspired smile curling his mouth.

"Come with me to Arizona," he pleaded.

Flames licked his leather shoes, and he hopped, howling, through the underbrush.

Without an ounce of remorse, Mustang glided to her bedroom, drying her feet before crawling into bed.

II

Montana's Meteorological Service had a field day with the phenomena. Their reports made Tuesday's national news, including the cable channels. The school bus couldn't navigate through illegally parked satellite vans blocking the road; Mustang alighted near the curve, so the driver could manage an awkward U-turn before disappearing toward town.

She'd dealt with these ratings-seekers in the past, including that unplanned excursion to Italy, when the media swarmed Francis of Assisi, resurrected from his tomb.

Why couldn't Stephen Jamison emulate the humility of that blessed saint? The priest from Arizona craved money, or fame, or other trivial results, and Mustang couldn't fathom those motivations.

She just wanted to be left alone.

Blaming no one but herself, however, she skirted the impromptu press conference with witnesses to the "miracles" taking place on the sunlit hill. Blackened soil marked where the fiery pillar had ignited from nothing; trees split by lightning littered the grounds.

She reminded herself that getting angry wrought disasters, and here lay proof.

Mustang presumed her parents would be watching from the front door, but she learned they were otherwise engaged. Stephen Jamison chatted with them over coffee in the living room.

"Oh, hell," she choked, trying unsuccessfully to retreat across the threshold when she saw him.

"Come in, girl," ordered Joe. "We need to talk."

She slung the backpack toward her bedroom and dropped onto the sofa next to Maggie.

"Am I in trouble?" she asked, feigning shyness.

Her mother gushed, "No, dear. Not at all. Fr. Jamison runs a program on the Navajo Reservation for high school seniors interested in mission service. He's extended an invitation for you to spend the last two months of your senior year in Arizona..."

Mustang shivered. "But, what about our agreement with the principal here?"

Not surprisingly, the Duryeas had already contacted that administrator, who willingly gave permission for the student's extended absence.

"Will I still graduate?"

“Of course. We wouldn’t put your future at risk...” stated Joe flatly.

The word Mustang would’ve used to describe that sentiment would have earned her a mouthful of soap. Joe Duryea wanted one thing from his offspring: hard work with his prized horses. Otherwise, she served no useful purpose.

“So, throw a few things in a suitcase,” Maggie instructed. “Fr. Jamison will pick you up first thing in the morning.”

Mustang rose. “No.”

“Don’t be disrespectful, girl,” Joe warned.

“I have no respect for any man - especially a man of the cloth - who can tell such bald-faced lies.” She marched to her room, slammed and locked the door.

Through the hollow wood, the teen listened as the elder Duryeas apologized profusely to their guest. The last word as he took his leave confirmed he had their permission to take Mustang to Arizona.

Dead bodies did not appeal to her, but she had wrought death and destruction before, and would do so again, before ever getting into a car with that... that...

Twice the circumference of its predecessor, a column of fire shot skyward in that instant, frying cameras in a 50 yard radius.

Instinct compelled her to run, immediately and far; Mustang glanced at her scarred palms. She might heal broken legs, gunshot wounds, or cause memory loss, but these hideous lumps of flesh discouraged hasty travel.

“I noticed the stigmata last night,” came quietly through the screen. “A sure sign of holiness.”

“You want to parade me around your reservation for the donations, or the power?”

“I need you to help the people.”

“Bullshit.”

“We didn’t get off to a good start,” Jamison admitted, “me mistaking you for the Blessed Virgin, and all that. But, if you can command the elements, you can show the people that God truly exists, and they should forsake their native spirituality and worship Him.”

Suddenly, the priest cringed, floating three feet above the flower beds.

“Will tricks like that convince the people?” challenged Mustang. “Or, do you want to go down in history as the sainted pastor who miraculously converted the entire indigenous population?”

“I... Let me down, please.”

“Your feet touch the ground, they better start running.”

“Amen, sister.”

Even though she settled on her mattress after Jamison's skinny frame merged with the trees, Mustang resigned herself to seeing him again. His type never surrendered.

Of those she'd encountered since that fateful day, only two struck her as honest and worthy of her respect: Peter O'Donnell and Francis of Assisi. Both had urged her to use her power for the good of humanity. Countless attempts only resulted in extensive "clean up" jobs after she blundered badly.

The likes of FBI agent Ben Espinoza, or murderer Wilfrid Bailey... ambitious or insane... threatening to complicate her existence with even more chaos...

Had she not viewed the spectacle with her own tear-swollen hazel eyes, she would not have believed it. A fresh convoy of media vehicles arrived to film their partially destroyed colleagues. Mustang marveled at the willingness of such corporations to waste profits sending crews to the middle of nowhere for a bit of nonsense coverage.

Spotlights aimed at the house kept her awake through the night. A cacophony of voices echoed in her ears. How she wanted to turn it all off, pull the plug. Concentrating on breathing calmed her frazzled spirit a bit, always spinning back to Stephen Jamison.

If - when - he set foot on the ranch again, he'd have a trip to Arizona he'd never forget.

That a hazardous material team, complete with white suits covering every inch of their bodies and filtered face masks, ascended the hill with geiger counters and natural gas detection equipment the next morning brought a laugh from Mustang's throat as she waited for the bus. No cracked piping would they find, no radioactive cache.

Merely a hot-tempered young woman desperate to maintain her composure.

The two days which passed saw a return to relative normalcy, thankfully.

Mustang learned at dinner that Joe had finally ordered the sheriff's department to clear off the trespassers. He erected signs along the road warning of prosecution.

For once, his daughter expressed gratitude.

"This has nothing to do with you, girl," her father snapped. "While I was in Helena picking up our feed order today, I got an earful about that Fr. Jamison. He started by telling the congregation he was visiting that he'd been blessed by a vision, then professed to being able to contact God face-to-face."

He'd contacted something face-to-face, Mustang chuckled between bites of apple pie, and it wasn't God.

The eager followers, burned both literally and figuratively, dispersed. They yearned for the New Testament deity, showing mercy and love. Old Testament fire and brimstone they got from their evangelical preachers, or hard-line priests with no tolerance for sinful souls seeking redemption.

Saturday morning, Mustang toted a sack of grass seed to the hill, intent on replanting the site of her angry outburst. While preparing the soil with a small hoe, she didn't hear stealthy feet creep up behind her before bony hands clutched her biceps.

"I need you to come with me," Jamison hissed.

"Not if you value your life," she refused, vocalizing a thought to the breeze.

Thing is: Stephen Jamison retained a firm grip, so the order sending him home to Arizona meant she became an unwilling passenger. She should've known better, after traveling to Japan with Rick Shimoto while they both held his samurai sword.

Still, nothing like waking up in the desert with a bull snake poised on a rock above her head.

"Oh, hell," she cursed.

A strong arm prevented her from leaping off the sand. "Don't move."

"Why?"

"There's a scorpion on your leg."

"Oh, hell."

With impressive agility, Jamison slid a twig between the scorpion's belly and her thigh, flicking it off before it could strike. Both exhaled audibly in relief.

"Thanks for that, anyway," gulped Mustang, propped on her elbows.

"Where are we?"

"Look across the arroyo."

Unfamiliar with the term, she scanned the horizon. A squarish, sun-bleached adobe church rose from a dry gulch, a weather-beaten double-wide trailer anchored beside it the priest's living quarters.

"Damn, when you said poor, you meant poor."

"This is a third world country, right in the middle of affluent America,"

Jamison explained, offering his hand. "Do you understand now?"

"Not really. You want to turn this backwater into a tourist attraction, by publicizing a few miracles?"

“No. I want to be able to stock the food pantry, establish a treatment program for drug and alcohol abusers...”

“Fine. Do it.”

“The people won’t come unless there’s some incentive.”

Mustang echoed, “Incentive?”

“For them to come to a parish council meeting, we must serve food. Even attendance at Sunday Mass depends on whether cookies and coffee are served, or a full meal. They want something for their effort, or they just stay home.”

“Pathetic.”

“No. Practical. If you’re spending money on gas that you need to spend on food, there’d better be compensation.”

“That’s all well and good, but I’ve got to get back...”

Jamison flipped her hands upward. “You pull that stunt again, and you’ll lose use of these.”

“It’s a risk I’ll take.”

“Stay, please. A day or so. Meet the people. See how they live.”

“Stay where? What you might call a home looks ready to collapse.”

“It’s plenty sturdy. And there’re three bedrooms. Or, if you prefer, the Sisters live 20 miles from here.”

“What, walking?” grumbled Mustang. “Your car is still parked in Montana.”

“It’d be like running a marathon.”

“I don’t run, unless I’m being chased.”

Jamison smirked. “By the boys?”

Her fists clenched.

“Sorry. It’s just that...”

“I may be stuck here, but I’m not defenseless. You keep talking, and you may lose use of your tongue - permanently.”

As if swatting flies, the priest made a Sign of the Cross, whispering, “Heaven help me.”

“What’s for lunch?”

Not much, it turned out. Stephen Jamison’s appetite ran to pinto beans and brown rice, which accounted for his skinny frame. Mustang, conversely, enjoyed thick steak, baked potatoes and chocolate pie.

She rummaged through kitchen cabinets, extracting a chicken and dumplings box meal only slightly past its expiration date. Ingredients mixed together, the casserole filled the structure with a delightful aroma as it baked.

Something else Mustang noticed on the shelves: a plentiful collection of empty liquor bottles. The priest might have little else to do in this isolated clime, but he wouldn't touch a drop in her presence. Given the behavior of actor Thomas Burton while intoxicated, she didn't want to deal with a drunk old cleric.

And, despite his athletic bent, Jamison qualified as old. Framed diplomas on the living room paneling declared his Masters in Theology had been secured forty years earlier. A photo from his ordination was dated a year later. In his sixties, at least.

Old men, after eating - if her father was any example - took naps. If Jamison chose this option, she could walk outdoors and a summoned lightning bolt would whisk her back to Montana...

Except, he'd been right about her hands. The pain coursing through her arms might have been unbearable for someone unaccustomed to the sensation. The nerves would not recover from another set of burns.

For that reason - or out of habit - Jamison cleared the dishes, washed them and stacked them in the drainer. Draping the towel over a wooden chair to dry, he offered, "Would you like to see my world?"

"Not if we have to walk."

"I can provide alternate transportation." He signaled her to follow him into the midday heat. Behind the church, a lopsided shed held a Honda mountain bike. Two helmets were hooked to the handlebars.

"No way..." Mustang protested.

"Why not? It hasn't rained in weeks, so we don't have to worry about getting stuck in the mud."

"You need... a special license for those things."

"I've ridden for thirty years."

If she'd been the praying sort, the teen would've consigned her fate to whatever deity gave heed. Holding onto his black leather jacket, they raced along the dirt track which turned onto a narrow highway, passing dilapidated dwellings - mobile homes, six-sided log structures, corrugated tin huts.

They paid calls on elders who spoke no English; Jamison had lived on the Reservation long enough to comprehend basic Navajo terms. Her power allowed Mustang's ears to translate automatically.

Some, he offered Communion, others ached to talk after extended periods of solitude. Many were stooped, diabetic, or dealing with cancer. Their pastor revealed that not only substance abuse, but sexual abuse, plagued the Native American population. Lack of electricity and indoor plumbing in some hovels contributed to the feeling of being, not in the U.S., but some far off, primitive land.

A specific incident gave Mustang definite insights into the Native American connection to the earth. In a clapboard hogan, an ancient figure sat enthroned on a bent-wood rocker. When the visitors entered, she began muttering in a high-pitched squeal.

Jamison attempted to soothe her, to no avail. He asked her to repeat the words more slowly.

Mustang, though, smirked at the frantic, “Bad medicine! Bad medicine!”

“No, Grandmother. I’ll not harm you.”

The priest gazed at his companion, awed. “She’s frightened of you?”

“Lots of people are.” She lowered herself on a rusty metal chair while Jamison offered a few prayers.

Riding onward, Mustang grasped why the priest had taken up running as a hobby. Some form of physical exertion was necessary to eradicate the images of intense poverty from even the most insensitive mind.

The motor bike sought a four-lane road, which took them into Window Rock, where a few restaurants offered tasty menus. The sun dropped behind the nearest mountains before they’d finished their entrees, and Jamison confessed the roads home could be treacherous in the dark. The lone motel on the main drag presented a safe haven.

“What’ll you use for money?” inquired Mustang.

“The manager and I have an agreement. I give her mother-in-law the Sacraments, and she keeps a room available for me, if I get stuck in town.”

“You mean ‘rooms’, right?”

He patted her arm. “We’ll negotiate something.”

Not such a bad sort, Mustang decided, given what she’d seen that day. Despite his arrogance, he had a tender side which the people appreciated. And, in this territory, it might be necessary to be a bit... hard-headed.

Ruminating as she gazed through the motel’s picture window, the sight of a girl her own age cutting across a brush field didn’t strike her as odd, until the girl froze, staring at the rattlesnake blocking her path. As it lashed out, Mustang grit her teeth. The creature dissolved into a pile of dust.

III

Stephen Jamison brought word of their satisfactory arrangements just as the snake’s demise transpired. The potential victim herself ran into the motel, breathless and trying to relate this bizarre story.

“I was praying to the Blessed Mother to get me home safely, Father, like you taught me, and then, then...”

The priest helped her to a seat; the desk clerk brought a cup of water.

Mustang wished she could vanish into the shadows.

Cell phones transcended dead zones between the mountains; news spread like a hot summer wildfire. A different type of celebrity surrounded the Montana native when she emerged at 6:30 Sunday morning, after a breakfast of fry bread, leftover mutton stew and blue corn mush in the motel’s employee lounge.

No sentimental prayers were uttered, just people ill, aged and crippled, anxious for healing, lined up through a parking lot damp with overnight rain as far as the eye could see. They stood silent, expectant.

And Mustang sensed anything she offered them would not change their fate one iota.

Just as the monetary pledges Jamison secured for the marathons would amount to pouring water in a leaky bucket.

Relief temporary, the cycle persisted through generations.

“Let’s get out of here,” she begged.

Jamison hesitated, helmet in hand. “But...”

“If it shuts you up, their every desire shall be fulfilled.”

“That’s not...”

“No, you want them to be happy, healthy, and come to worship your God. They want peace, tranquility, food and shelter. Which of you is right, and which is wrong, I’ll not guess.”

The Honda speeding along two lanes of asphalt presented no difficulties.

Turning onto packed dirt, however, slowed them to a crawl, tire treads spitting mud in all directions and, eventually, sinking to immobility.

Both Mustang and Jamison dismounted, the motorcycle remaining erect, so thick the mire. “Well?” the priest ventured.

“Well, what?”

“Do your thing.”

“What thing?” sniffed the teen.

“Get us out of this.”

“No. If I wasn’t here, you’d have to do it yourself...”

“I’d be walking.”

“You mean...”

“I’m not going to wrench my back wrestling that out of the muck.”

Repressing yet another caustic remark, Mustang hiked toward the church.

“So be it.”

They reached the flat-roofed structure in time for the 8:00 Mass, every pew filled with bodies, others jammed against crumbling adobe walls. The heat compelled Mustang to retreat through warped wooden doors.

“Oh, no you don’t!” Jamison reprimanded her. “You need to meet these people.”

“Because they were promised a spectacle?”

A very tangible anticipation vibrated through the crowd as she traversed the center aisle, decorated with native rugs. Built before electricity, wiring which powered the overhead chandeliers had been stapled to the rough-hewn beams.

The sanctuary boasted a mural of a native Christ blessing the children behind the hand-carved altar.

Mustang didn’t hold with these rituals, and when Stephen Jamison slipped into the sacristy to don his liturgical vestments, she moved to duck out the side door.

“Why don’t you believe in God?” he shot at her retreating form.

“Ask those people.”

“They believe in God, only in a different way.”

“They want to believe in a benevolent figurehead, but their harsh reality casts doubt. They only came today because word got ‘round there’s going to be a show.”

He didn’t respond.

“There’s usually just a handful, right?”

An imperceptible nod.

“Why? Why coax them here, jolt their souls, then let them face disappointment all over again when they learn it’s not true?”

“It is true!” he bellowed, before covering his mouth, embarrassed.

Mustang led him to a wobbly folding chair. “Listen to me. Buddha, five centuries before Jesus, discovered the truth that the world turns without human input, and will continue long after we’re gone. He tried to teach his followers to live in harmony through right thinking, right action, and all that. They twisted his words and founded a religion.

“Jesus suffered the same injustice, and it had nothing to do with him being crucified. His fame was hijacked by the likes of Paul, and manipulated into a belief system far beyond the idea of merely being kind to one another. It’s an endless repetition of the same need for humans to escape responsibility, and hope for a future, not just death and... nothing.”

“You’re speaking heresy.”

“Fluently.”

“Is it so wrong to hope?” The tenor resembled a dog’s painful whine. “Is it wrong to give these people something other than a day-to-day hell?”

“What these people have is a rich culture, trashed by a government who had no tolerance for their ways, and greedy for their land. They’ve given up, because their dignity was stripped from them, more than anything. There’s an old John Wayne movie - *McLintock!* I think - where the chiefs ask for ‘one remembered fight’. They’re being treated like widows and orphans, and have lost their will to do more than live out their days.”

Mustang stepped outside. “As for day-to-day hell: that’s my life, every moment, thanks to fools like you.”

Jamison waited until she had entered the double-wide trailer before proceeding with his Sunday obligations. Most of the congregation walked out when he explained the young woman’s refusal to help them, leaving the faithful few.

Coffee in hand, he shook his guest awake around noon.

“What?” she snarled.

“Like some?” he hinted, pointing at the mug.

“No. Thanks.”

“Will you listen to me now?” He sat on the edge of the lumpy mattress.

“Do I have a choice?”

“Not really.”

Mustang rolled over, rearranged and plumped her pillows, and sat up. “Go ahead.”

“I grew up in Michigan. A totally different world. My dad’s job got transferred, so my parents moved us to Phoenix. When Mom and Dad divorced, we ended up in Gallup, New Mexico. Back then, it was customary for one son to enter the priesthood. I was the youngest of four, so it fell to me.”

She bit back a scathing comment.

“I know, I know. When I was ordained, I was assigned to parishes in the city, but wasn’t good at relating to people. That’s what entering the minor seminary at 14 does. It’s stunts your emotional growth, and your social skills never develop. The bishop decided I’d be better off alone, so he sent me here, thirty years ago.

“The Native Americans don’t like Anglos, as a rule. Hell, they don’t like each other, half the time. There’s still tension between the tribes and, God forbid, they should intermarry. Worse, if one of the youngsters decides to pursue higher education off the Reservation, they usually can’t come home, because it’s seen as a betrayal, adopting the white man’s way. I tried to befriend them, but most of them

shunned me. When they saw I was willing to be used, though, they flocked to the church.”

“Used?”

“There’s a certain attitude of... entitlement among some factions. They get their government check and spend it freely, then rely upon the churches to subsidize them until the next month. They’ll create some marvelous hard-luck tales to get money, food or other assistance. In those early days, I fell for them all.”

“And wound up broke?”

“I was already broke. I used church funds to help them, and nearly got prosecuted for embezzlement.”

“Nothing’s changed in all that time?”

“Nope. Not ‘til you.”

“Eh?”

“The money pledged for my marathons goes directly to the people. They lap it up like thirsty dogs at a water dish. No gratitude, just questions about when there will be more. I can’t blame them. They haven’t been exposed to the real world. They’re lucky to make it through high school. The girls drop out because they get pregnant; the boys have to get jobs to support their families, because one or both parents are alcoholics, or face severe health issues.

“Y’know, right before I left for Montana, I buried three kids under 25. Two committed suicide, one was shot in a gang fight.”

As he mused, Jamison’s countenance transformed to a mask of extreme sadness. “I’d all but lost my faith, until I saw that vision.”

Mustang straightened. “What you saw can be explained scientifically. The adrenaline moving your legs caused hallucinations...”

“Bullshit! A kindly angel watched over me...”

“Well, at least it’s not the Blessed Mother anymore.”

“It’s you. You are an angel enfleshed. No mere human could do what you do.”

“Including kill you.”

The priest stiffened.

“I confess, Father, people tend to drop dead in my presence.”

An exaggeration, perhaps, but still true.

“How? Why?”

“My own stupidity. When I get angry, I do horrible things. Like the other night, on the hill. Other people’s stupidity really pisses me off.”

“You’re saying I’m stupid?” he huffed.

“I’m not saying anything. You... confuse me. You seem like a good man, with leanings toward a generous heart. But there’s something of the... opportunist in you. That bothers me. I’ve dealt with that kind before, and it never ends well.”

“I simply want the people to see their faith is justified...”

“Faith in what? The change you want for them, the change they may need, has to come from within their own souls. No God, no human, can impose that upon them. I’ve heard a person can only change himself. That being the case, I’m too busy trying to change myself into someone with an ounce of self-control, so I don’t keep causing disasters at every turn.”

He rose, dejected fingers running through his grey straw-like hair. “Okay. The next question: how do I get my car back from Montana?”

“You’ll have to spring for an airline ticket to Helena, I suppose.”

“Is that how you’ll get home?”

“No. Traveling on planes makes me sick.”

“And, this...” he flipped her palms, “this doesn’t?”

“What this does can’t be explained. But it’s faster, and doesn’t inconvenience anyone.”

“When will you...”

“After some lunch?” she urged.

“Peanut butter and jelly?”

“You didn’t...”

“Two of the parishioners freed the bike from the mud, so I went to the store while you were asleep.”

They ate in silence, interrupted by a persistent knocking on the pockmarked metal door. Jamison answered the summons, inviting Mustang to tour the food pantry while he tended to a family with six small children.

The two youngest gaped at her auburn hair, flowing in gentle waves over her shoulders. She admired their long, black braids and cherubic faces.

A mottled brown, stray mutt approached on the dirt track, not seeking a treat. Jamison halted the group, “Rabies!”

Mustang didn’t break stride. Indeed, she could’ve put the mangy, flea-ridden animal out of its misery, but bringing more trauma into those lives would be even more cruel. She squatted and called the dog. The phrase, “It’s all right,” had double meaning.

Once Jamison confirmed their safety, the dog trotted alongside the family, playing eagerly with his new young friends.

As the pastor filled boxes with cereal, canned vegetables and soup, baking mix, rice, beans and packets of ramen noodles, bread and crackers, he spoke in

hushed tones. “The Sisters limit each family to one small box. It wouldn’t last them one day.” The astonishingly new Dodge Ram pickup truck held four large boxes when the family crammed inside and made their departure.

Without the dog.

Who followed the pair toward the church.

“You have a compassionate soul,” Jamison remarked tentatively. “How is it you also kill?”

“I’m a human being. I have... moods. You read from the Old Testament every day during your Mass. Are there not stories of God showering down his wrath, as well as being merciful?”

“You’re not God.”

“No, and God is just a projection of human traits, to explain the fortune or misfortune of believers. He is called ‘all-merciful’, yet justifies going to war?”

Her companion shrugged.

“And the churches, in God’s name, what have they accomplished through the centuries? Even today, those who hold their faith is the only true one oppress, harass and murder others who believe differently. Stupid.”

Stupid. She’d seen the marathon as stupid little more than a week ago. A lot of stupidity had occurred in that period. Worse would be the reaction of her parents when she returned home. Their concern for her absence would be less than overwhelming.

“I should be on my way.”

“Even though your folks were willing to let you spend the last months of this semester in my ministry program?”

Her steps faltered. “Every teenager says it, but in this instance, it’s fact: they don’t understand me.”

“Do they know about... your...”

“Deep down, I think they suspect. They’ve never mentioned it. It’s a long story, but my mother has to know something about her mother’s relationship with Jack Parsons, and the implications...”

“Parents can be pretty blind sometimes, even when they believe they’re thinking clearly.”

“Amen, brother.”

For the first time, they chuckled together. The mutt wagged his tale, as if he grasped the humor.

Mustang sobered, reaching to scratch the dog’s floppy ears. “Why did you lie to my parents?”

“About what?”

“Having a program for kids involving mission service.”

“It’s no lie. Every summer, college and high school students come from the East to help on the Reservation. Three other pastors and myself fixed up the gym of the abandoned school on the main road - remember, we passed it - for their housing. They do basic maintenance around the churches, or projects needed by the locals, like chopping firewood for next winter.”

“You *did* lie to the congregation in Helena, though, about seeing God face-to-face.”

“No, I just didn’t know then what I know now.”

She grunted, “Technicalities.”

“An honest mistake,” he retorted.

“A mistake you wouldn’t have made, if you’d believed me when we first spoke.”

“Mea culpa.”

A rusty, mud-splashed Ford Ranger trundled up the dirt road at excessive speed. Instinctively, Jamison yanked Mustang from its path as it neared.

Topped by a crumpled straw cowboy hat, the driver leapt from the cab.

“Father, you must come quick! Vernon’s got a gun!”

IV

Piling into the cramped pickup, Stephen Jamison, Mustang Duryea and Howard Yazzie took off for the bumpy journey to a compound of mobile homes which had seen better days - the family homestead. Even with the windows secured against the evening chill, the trio could hear shouting in English and Navajo from a dwelling surrounded by a collection of working and non-working vehicles.

Mustang clutched a handful of Jamison’s sleeve as he sidled toward the door. “Are you crazy? What can you do against a drunk with a pistol?”

“Stop him from inflicting more damage on his already broken family.”

“You mean, this isn’t the first time?”

“Out here, it’s a regular occurrence,” explained the priest, shaking free. “Someone loses a child to suicide, or a relative is sentenced to jail for driving while intoxicated, and the desperation peaks...”

The teen could only shake her auburn-crowned head.

Yet, she pursued him, fearing the worst.

Listening from the threshold of the unbelievably decrepit structure, dissuaded from entering by the horrendous stench of rotting food, excrement and

alcohol-fueled perspiration, Mustang caught parts of the conversation Jamison might have missed.

Tidbits about why Vernon's 15-year-old daughter had, indeed, killed herself. Her own father had sexually abused her, and she'd discovered her own pregnancy during a physical exam for the softball team at school.

Sadly, not an uncommon situation on the Reservation. Mustang had noticed the billboards in Window Rock, declaring, "One in three native women is sexually abused."

She wanted to light the man on fire where he stood, brandishing a revolver and threatening anyone who approached.

Jamison could not calm Vernon, or reason with him to surrender the weapon, nor could those family members present. Mustang tired of the futile exchange, retreating to fresher air, and kicking a pail of rainwater off the porch.

The distraction gave Jamison an opening; he rushed the younger man and a struggle for the gun commenced.

Mustang froze when the shot resounded between the mountains. "Oh, hell," she muttered, returning inside.

As she suspected, Stephen Jamison lay on the filthy tile floor, bleeding from the stomach. A stunned and contrite Vernon cowered in the corner, as the others hovered helplessly over the prostrate form.

"Get out of the way!" shouted the teen, not caring if they heard her in English or their native tongue.

They complied, and she knelt beside the gasping priest.

"I told you so," she grumbled, before glancing up at the blank faces. "Get out!"

All too slowly, as Jamison's life rapidly ebbed, the group filed from the building. Finally alone, Mustang issued the command, nature's reply a strong wind, swirling dust in all directions and rattling the window frames. A mangled blob of metal popped into her hand; she flung it aside.

A fit of coughing roused her patient from his death throes, and he shot upright. "What the devil?"

"No, only me."

Their eyes met, and Jamison dissolved into sobs of relief.

"I saw my life flash before me, and the futility of it all..."

Mustang soothed him with a gentle embrace. "Then, this was worth it."

When he recovered sufficient strength, she assisted him to a standing position, and together they emerged from the house. Chattering among themselves,

the Yazzie family fell into a hush, astounded by the sight of the uninjured priest, his shirt nonetheless stained red with his own blood.

As one, they fell on their knees, invoking every deity they knew, from Grandfather Earth to the Creator Spirit.

“Howard, please take us back to the church,” Mustang directed, and the man shakily rose to comply.

The twilight ride back to the mission less frantic, also boasted a tense silence. Deposited at the double-wide trailer, Jamison couldn’t restrain a chuckle at Howard’s frightened countenance during the drive.

“Well, you’ve accomplished what I’d intended,” the priest sighed, “but it’s too late.”

“Too late for what?”

“To make any real changes here.”

“I said as much.”

“Now, I understand. Nothing like facing death to really see...”

“What... did you see?”

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing. No bright lights, no ethereal relatives beckoning me toward the pearly gates...”

Leading her inside, Jamison offered her some hot cocoa.

“Yes, please,” she smiled.

“I owe you my thanks, and my life.”

“You owe me nothing.” She sank on the lumpy living room sofa. “Most people don’t survive around me.”

“I... meant to ask you about that.”

“You already did. I’ll be honest: you have two choices regarding our... encounter. You can either forget you ever knew me, or die.”

From the kitchen: “That sounds... very final.”

“It’s how things work, unfortunately.”

“And, if I agree to simply stay here and continue to tend the people’s needs?”

“That’s all well and good, I guess. But, they’ve witnessed another of your purported miracles. They’ll be hanging from the rafters next Sunday just to see you. Your bishop won’t be pleased.”

“Most likely not.”

Mustang cleared her throat, swallowing a harsh comment about Church hierarchy.

Jamison, wearing a clean Arizona State t-shirt, brought two mugs, and settled beside her. “What will you tell him?”

“Me? I’m not staying.”

“You must, now. There will be inquiries, investigations.”

She covered her face with trembling, scarred hands. “No, no...”

No choice would be left her. She would have to erase their memories...

Or, reverse time to the previous week, and make certain she didn’t venture out to the hillock on the morning of the marathon, so she and Jamison would never meet...

Too drastic, and potentially earth-shattering. Besides, Jamison had learned a valuable lesson, and needed to apply it to his own existence.

“Tell the bishop...” she searched her brain for a viable tale. “Tell the bishop the bullet hit a prayer book you keep in your pocket, and you were only stunned by the impact.”

“Lie?”

“You, better than I, know what hell you’d have to go through - we’d both go through - if this fiasco continues.”

“What about the bloody shirt?” he pressed.

“Burn it.”

He smirked, a rather unpleasant twist to his pale lips. “And there’s no evidence of a wound.”

“No. The skin heals perfectly.”

“You know this from experience?”

“To my shame, yes.”

They drank their beverages in silence, Mustang not realizing the contents of Jamison’s cup was generously laced with whiskey.

The trauma his body had withstood caused the alcohol to affect him harder than usual. He began rambling about his days in the minor seminary, pitching for the baseball team and running cross country. Mustang could only listen and snicker at some of the more off-color stories.

Sun setting through the dust-coated picture window, Mustang left him dozing after an hour. She had school in the morning, and couldn’t risk being expelled for tardiness or an unexcused absence.

She hated her life.

She despised what she had become, all thanks to Jack Parsons.

Trekking to a slope distant enough from the church so the lightning bolt would cause no collateral damage, she audibly expressed a wish to go home.

Seconds later, a loud crack declared to her slumbering parents that an expected spring storm had begun.

Or, not.

Joe Duryea crawled from bed and peered between the curtains.

Nothing.

If he'd bothered to look harder, he would have seen a furtive shadow crossing the lawn.

Scrambling to grab breakfast Monday morning, Mustang didn't pay much attention to the news blaring from the television. Nor did her parents, until a panoramic view of the Arizona mountains filled the screen.

Damn the meteorologists! the teen swore inwardly.

"Random lightning flashes are becoming widespread," claimed a 20-something in a blue suit and red tie. "They're no longer confined to the region around Helena, but have now been reported in other states, as well."

"Maybe that's what we heard last night," opined Joe, emptying the coffee pot into a thermos.

Maggie replied, "Could be."

The voice droned, "Meteorologists are collaborating on a national scale to determine the origin of these phenomena."

Mustang rolled her eyes, snatched her backpack off the coat rack, and headed for the bus stop.

That Friday, a bulky Priority Mail envelope arrived, bearing Mustang's name. She found it on her bedroom desk when she arrived home after a long day at Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High. Struggling to control her rage in the midst of all the stupidity of puerile students....

The letter, dated two days earlier, had been written by Fr. Stephen Jamison, and told of what had transpired after she "disappeared" the previous Sunday.

"Never would I have imagined," read the slanted scrawl, "that 48 hours could be so frantic and heart-breaking. No more had a photo of you and I appeared in the local paper, than the bishop phoned, summoning me to his office. I was immediately suspended from active ministry, and am scheduled to be transported by week's end to Phoenix for a comprehensive inpatient mental evaluation."

"Oh, hell," Mustang muttered. She could have predicted such troubles...

The second page elaborated, "Had it not been for eye-witness testimony - and the photos snapped on their cell phones - the bishop would not have believed you existed. When I went into detail about how we met, and how we came to be at the Yazzie's homestead, I was accused of inebriate hallucinations. Nothing I said would convince him of the truth.

“I would ask you to intervene, but your fate would be no better than my own. You would have to display your power - as you did for me - and the bishop would probably proceed with a Vatican-sanctioned exorcism. Such a farce that would be!”

Jamison concluded, “I know, in my heart, you meant no harm by your actions. I am completely to blame; I should have believed your explanation about a trick of the sunlight and excessive adrenaline during the marathon, and simply returned home after crossing the finish line. Too late, now, to change history.”

The teen smirked to herself. Little did he realize...

But, no. To make matters worse...

The sheets were crumpled into balls and tossed toward the wicker waste basket beside her desk.

She lay awake that night, mulling the predicament. Not his fault, but hers, and she must remedy the situation. The throbbing anguish in her hands, radiating up her arms, prevented another jaunt via lightning bolt. Her commands to the natural elements, though, were not confined to the locality in which she dwelt...

Incapacitating the vehicle which would drive Jamison to Phoenix might be a distinct possibility. Then, freed of whatever shackles confined him, he could make good an escape...

To where?

He'd have to travel to Montana to retrieve his car.

That meant another encounter with tenuous consequences.

Further deliberation confirmed it was worth the risk.

Slumber interrupted by her alarm clock - even on weekends, she couldn't sleep in, thanks to the chores assigned her by Joe Duryea - Mustang dragged herself into the kitchen, rummaging through the cupboards for cereal she liked.

“I'm fixing French toast,” announced Maggie, at the stove.

“No thanks, Mom.”

Not finding anything tempting, the teen peered into the living room, where the morning edition of cable news hummed on the television. She'd grown to hate the media for how they twisted stories to increase their ratings. Or, pounced on some nonsense and created an international sensation.

Here was proof: footage of some war zone, rocket propelled grenades blasting away at unseen targets. How did the reporters obtain such video? If the cameras had been that close to the action, why also weren't the opposing military forces, to stop the attack?

“Next, to the Arizona desert,” announced the female anchor - blonde and slender - to her compatriot, appearing equally pleasant in a designer suit.

“The Catholic priest who claimed miracles in Montana, and survived a bullet wound through supposed divine intervention, temporarily eluded guards from a private mental institution last night on Interstate 17 just south of Flagstaff. A marathon athlete, Fr. Stephen Jamison outdistanced his pursuers for over two hours, until he suffered a heart attack and died instantly.”

Mustang collapsed into her father’s favorite recliner.

“An autopsy is expected to confirm Fr. Jamison suffered from an irregular heartbeat and cancer,” added the male anchor.

Maggie heard the sobs over the crackle of frying butter and egg-coated bread. She abandoned the cast-iron skillet to investigate. “Honey? What’s wrong?”

Reddened eyes glanced at the older woman. “Nothing, Mom. Nothing.” Mustang managed to right herself and hurried to her room, slamming the door.

Another death to her credit.

Her mind tried to rationalize the tragedy. She’d had no way of knowing Jamison’s health issues. Someone who runs on a regular basis can be presumed physically fit. She hadn’t forced him to run...

She’d opened the door to his demise, nonetheless, by facilitating the escape. Clenched fists pounded the pillow, redoubling the pain shooting up her arms from her scarred palms.

Doubting she would ever learn to control her impulsive use of Jack Parsons’ powers, she focused on steadying her breathing, eventually calm enough to answer her father’s call, “Stop wasting time and get to work!”

“Right, Dad.”

Flannel shirt and jeans fastened, she slipped into mud-coated leather boots and headed to the barn.