

The Mustang Chronicles:

Prancing Mustang

A Novella

by

Eugenia Lucas

I

Maggie and Joe Duryea were worried.

Horse theft may have been a problem in Montana during the 1800s, but for ranchers to have their stock stolen in the 21st century smacked of the ludicrous.

And, of course, the local sheriff and his deputies had been unable to trace the animals which had gone missing from neighboring corrals, or find so much as a tire track from the trailers used in the crimes.

Their daughter, Elizabeth - known as Mustang - listened to their daily discussions of the turmoil in the district around Helena. She had decided, should the thieves trespass on her family's property, they would receive an unpleasant welcome.

If anyone could make such a prediction, the red haired teenager could. Though her parents didn't know it, she'd acquired a unique set of magickal powers more than a year before. A bizarre trip to Scotland was followed by "riding the lightning" to Italy and Japan, then defying space *and* time to experience first-hand the devastation of World War II.

Traveling without the aid of conventional transportation wasn't Mustang's only skill. She had no need for high school language courses, being able to understand any dialect by simply verbalizing a desire to do so. She'd caused trees in remote areas of the 2000-acre estate to ignite spontaneously, doused by equally unforeseen rains. Earthquakes shook the ground at her command, and microbursts of wind could tear the roof off a house in seconds. Conversely, she could heal the most serious injuries and repair damaged buildings.

All without the need for what she viewed as silly rhyming spells, potions, wands or gestures.

Admittedly, the power didn't impact Mustang's performance in school. These last months of her senior year held bright promise for her classmates, boasting of their acceptance into prestigious universities in the East or California, while she knew her destiny was to continue working with the horses she loved to the depths of her soul. The principal had forced her, at the beginning of the semester, to agree not to skip classes, which was the only reason she sat on the uncomfortable plastic chairs each day.

"Did you read this morning's paper?" Mustang overheard a girl whisper during first hour Trigonometry that Monday.

Her friend replied, "No, should I have?"

"The Nobles lost ten of their best brood mares Saturday night."

The Nobles' ranch bordered the Duryea's on the east. Mustang paid no further attention to sines and angles that period, ruminating instead on the boldness of men.

Joe Duryea's ranch hands had been riding armed midnight patrols for two weeks. He had forbidden Mustang from joining them, uncertain how many criminals were working together, or how violent they might be. As the moon rose early Tuesday, the girl's silhouette could be seen atop her favorite mount, a pinto named Heartbeat, near the barbed wire fence stretching along the pasture's northern perimeter.

Nothing. Not so much as a wolf howling through the wee hours.

In her father's estimation, nothing was good. If the pattern of nothing continued, it might indicate the culprits had moved their operation elsewhere, or were satisfied with the stock they'd already stolen.

The number of riders pulling extra shifts gradually declined, which Mustang guessed would be what the thieves expected. They would strike when the Duryea crew's guard was down, as they'd done at the other ranches.

She patrolled alone beneath a full moon, an incomparable experience. Fresh spring grass stretched in all directions, rustling in a light breeze. Deer foraged near the trees, and squirrels chattered overhead. After an hour in the saddle, she dismounted to stretch her legs. Thus hidden behind Heartbeat's sturdy bulk, the horsemen galloping up the hill didn't see her.

They'd honed their craft to perfection, that much was clear. None of the riders uttered a word, three of them leaping the fence like pros, while two others cut the barbed wire between two posts to create an egress.

Mustang opened her mouth to shout a decree which would freeze the men in their tracks. Unfortunately, Heartbeat chose that exact moment to bolt, kicking her in the chest and knocking her to the ground.

By the time she recovered enough to sit up, both men and horses were gone.

She trudged home on foot with the dawn, anticipating her father's displeasure. She knew she deserved a reprimand for ignoring his orders. Still, she would've rather gone to bed and nursed her bruised ribs.

"Did you think you could stop them single-handed?" Joe roared, the kitchen windows vibrating with every syllable.

If she confessed that was *precisely* what she'd been thinking, the argument would've escalated. "No, Dad, I..."

"They could've killed you!" interspersed Maggie Duryea, her hint of middle-aged spread evident within the yellow terry cloth bathrobe.

“They weren’t carrying guns...”

“They might’ve had knives,” Joe retorted. “Did you think of that? Or how a strong man can break a smaller person’s neck with his bare hands?”

“They never even saw me, Dad!”

Maggie breathed, “Thank God for that!”

“Whether they saw you or not, what you did was totally irresponsible,” her husband snarled.

“I was *trying* to be responsible,” snapped Mustang. “They’re my horses, too, when push comes to shove, and I didn’t want to see the family’s income shot to hell.”

“I don’t give a hang about the horses,” said Joe. He ran his hand through thinning brown hair. “The horses are insured, and can be replaced. My daughter can’t.”

The laughter bubbled inside his daughter and burst forth like a fountain, and the elder Duryea didn’t understand why. He had no way of knowing how close she’d come to death numerous times since rocket scientist and occultist Jack Parsons had transferred his power to her. Mustang saw the irony in his declaration and couldn’t help her reaction.

“Go to bed now,” Maggie instructed. “I’ll call the school and tell them what happened.”

“No, don’t. I’ve still got time to catch the bus...”

Joe prodded, calmer now, “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.” If nothing else, she might hear some rumor about the horse thieves to help her succeed where the police had failed.

First, though, she had to put Heartbeat back in his stall. The errant pinto had wandered home by the time Mustang showered and changed clothes. He was waiting by the front steps when she bounded through the door.

“About time,” she chided, rubbing his nose affectionately. “I thought they might’ve taken you, too.”

He nuzzled her neck apologetically. Holding the tangled reins, she led him to the barn. She tied him in his stall, filled his water trough and poured oats into his feed bag. Then, she unfastened the mud-splashed saddle and slid it off his back.

“Where’d you go, boy?” she puzzled, wiping the leather clean before hanging it in the tack room. No answer was forthcoming; she wasn’t surprised. “There are days when I wish horses could speak English,” she sighed. “And today is one.”

The floor boards underfoot trembled and shifted ominously. A burst of wind slammed the barn door closed; the lights flickered. Heartbeat sneezed - or seemed to - vigorously shaking his head .

“You okay, boy?” asked Mustang.

The reply dropped her in the straw. “Damn, that felt weird.”

She stared at Heartbeat’s mouth, unsure if she’d seen the jowls move at all. The school bus driver honked the horn three times before she roused from her stupor. She scrambled to her feet and dusted off her jeans before sprinting from the barn.

“We’ll talk later, okay?” she called over her shoulder.

Her focus on the yellow behemoth idling at the end of the drive, red lights blinking, she didn’t see the man walking toward her from the house. She sprinted within inches of him; he hooked his arm around her waist. Inertia whipped her around, but he managed to hold on and keep her from falling.

“What the hell...” she sputtered, breaking from his grasp.

He grinned, prominent cheekbones accenting his mirth, “Sorry about that. It’s just that I need to ask you a few questions before you head to school.” He waved dismissively to the bus driver, who shifted the diesel engine into gear and rumbled out of sight.

“Who *are* you?” challenged Mustang.

“I’m Jim Neville, from the Montana State Police post in Butte. We’re investigating the horse thefts, and when your father phoned the sheriff this morning, he patched the call through to us.”

Catching her breath, the girl studied Neville intently. He wore a blue wool suit with a black turtleneck. She guessed him to be in his late twenties or early thirties, from the smoothness of his skin. He had classic features: deep-set brown eyes topped by arched brows, wavy black hair parted on the left and swept back from his high forehead. The straight nose and square jaw gave him a stern look. Towering six inches above her, his muscular build and broad shoulders could have added to his threatening aura, had his straight teeth not shown brilliantly between sculpted lips.

“Dad’s in the house. He’ll tell you anything you need to know. I’m going to be late for school...”

Mustang backed away; Neville’s quick fingers encircled her arm. “I’ll give you a ride,” he reassured her in a resounding bass. “With the siren and lights. You’ll be there in plenty of time.”

He escorted her to the house, where Maggie distracted herself by washing dishes in the kitchen sink and Joe paced wear marks in the living room carpet.

Neville deposited Mustang on the faded gold sofa, pulled out a small notepad and settled in the matching armchair.

“Your father believes you may have seen the suspects...” he prompted.

“Yes.”

“How many were there?”

“At least six, maybe ten.”

“What were they wearing?”

Mustang laughed. “Clothes.”

“This is serious, girl,” barked Joe. “No need to be sarcastic.”

“Sorry, Dad.” She reflected a moment. “They were wearing jeans, boots and plaid shirts.”

“Did they conceal their faces in any way?”

“Nope.”

“Did you recognize any of them?”

She couldn’t help it. “In the *dark*?”

Neville visibly restrained his temper. “Look, Beth...”

“Don’t *ever* call me that,” warned Mustang.

“Fine. Look, you’re the only witness we have to this rash of thefts. Your descriptions could make or break our investigation. Anything you remember may be of vital importance.”

“I’m not going to remember anything now; I’ve got too much on my mind. Take me to school, let me sleep through a couple classes...”

Her father scowled, not catching the joke.

“Swing back at 3:00, and I’ll give you the rest of the day to pick my brain.”

Neville flipped the notepad closed and rose. “Deal.”

The black, unmarked police vehicle passed unnoticed by Mustang’s fellow students when it parked near the main entrance of Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High. Mustang herself, however, garnered a lot of attention, from the television news reporters and representatives of the Helena Chronicle swarming outside the glass doors.

Cameras flashed, and microphones were jammed in her face as she tried to shove through the crush. She contemplated using her power to clear a path for herself, when Neville did it for her.

“You’re all in danger of being arrested for trespassing,” he shouted, flashing his badge. “I’ll give you thirty seconds to vacate the premises, before I call for back-up.”

An effective ploy. As skirted women scurried after men lugging bulky equipment, Mustang and Neville shared a chuckle.

“Thanks,” smirked the teen. “You really didn’t have to...”

Neville shrugged. “A kid like you needs protecting.”

“You’re be surprised,” Mustang countered.

“I don’t get you.”

The first bell rang.

“I promise, I’ll explain later.” She reached for the door handle, then paused. “By the way, what do I call *you*? Detective, sergeant, what?”

“Jim will do, though people I’ve put behind bars call me far worse than detective. What about you? You don’t like Beth. Is it Liz, Betty, or Elizabeth?”

She cringed. “It’s Mustang.”

The door closed on his confused expression, and she giggled all the way to the mathematics wing.

Neville’s wristwatch read 3:20 when Mustang slid onto the front seat of the Chevy Caprice. He held it where she could see the LCD display. “I’ve been waiting a half-hour.”

“Sorry. It would help if you had that rack of flashing lights on top. I’m not used to hunting around for these clone cars.”

“Clone cars?”

“Cars that look like every other car built by every other manufacturer.”

“Ah, that’s why they call you Mustang, because you like Ford’s redesigned model...”

“Wrong.” She made a buzzer noise like a game-show sound effect. “I’m good with horses.”

The bulb went on in Neville’s brain - supposedly. “Which is why you were in the barn this morning...”

“Which is why I was riding last night. I’ve had a hand in caring for every one of those horses, and to see them forced from their favorite grazing land...”

“Their favorite...” Incredulous, Neville glared at his passenger. “How do you know it’s their favorite grazing land?”

“How do you know when your mother likes the roses you give her, or your dad the fishing pole you chose as a Christmas present? Their eyes light up, and they are calm and contented...”

“You *do* know a lot about horses.”

“Enough to be able to identify the horses the thieves were riding.”

“They were on horseback themselves?”

She nodded.

“That fact alone eliminates a lot of speculation.” He steered into the afternoon traffic. “We couldn’t figure out how they were getting the horses away, since we found no signs of trailers. On horseback, they could’ve driven them miles across the countryside, loading them far beyond the scope of our search.”

“You *do* know a lot about being a detective,” joked Mustang.

Neville’s fingers clenched and unclenched. “At least, interrogating you won’t be dull. Are you hungry?”

“Huh?”

“It’s not like you’re under suspicion, and you did make me miss my lunch break. Instead of doing this at the police post in Butte, we can talk just as easily at some restaurant...”

II

The red-headed senior and the plain-clothes detective occupied a booth at a truck stop outside the legal boundary of Canyon Creek. She sipped a chocolate shake while he played with the straw floating in his orange soda. A lock of dark hair flopped over his forehead, making him look younger and almost naive.

Yet, a maturity smoldered in his eyes. Mustang pondered how many murders he’d investigated, kidnappings or drug deals.

“How long have you been a cop?” she queried.

“Ten years.”

“Ever been shot?”

“Shot *at*, not hit.”

“Seen anyone else killed?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Not pretty, is it?” Mustang regretted the comment as soon as she made it.

Neville caught the unusual inference. “What does a kid like you know about such things?”

She had the sense not to mention inflicting the fatal knife wound which ended Jack Parsons’ elongated life. Her hands raised in surrender, a regrettable move in itself.

“What the hell happened to *you*?” the detective gasped at the sight of the large scars on both palms.

“I promised to tell you about the theft, not... my life story.”

“Don’t try to cover up any physical abuse...”

“Jim, please.” The waitress brought plates with greasy hamburgers and french fries. As he bit into the thick patty, she continued. “I spent study hall re-

enacting last night in my brain. I think I can give you pretty accurate descriptions of the seven men who pulled the job.”

“In that case, the police artist will have to be involved. You didn’t recognize any of them?”

“Never seen them before. They were good horsemen, though, and very organized.”

“You being good with horses, I understand the first observation, but why the second?”

“They never made a sound the whole time. Each one knew what he had to do, and did it flawlessly. Either they’d practiced beforehand, or they’ve done it enough to become highly skilled.”

Neville jotted notes with his free hand. “You ever thought of being a detective?”

“No.”

“Your powers of observation are better than most your age.”

“My powers extend far beyond mere observation.”

“How so?”

Mustang glanced around the restaurant. The other patrons were minding their own business. In the interim, Neville swiped a few fries through a puddle of catsup, bending to catch them before they dripped; his plate began to rise from the table.

“What the...”

“Good manners dictates you shouldn’t lean in to your food, the food should come to you,” quipped Mustang.

He dropped his pen and his fries and sank back on the bench. “What are you, some sort of magician?”

“If you mean the David Copperfield type of stage magician, no.”

“Then, what...”

“I can... make things happen...”

“Like what?”

She debated the danger of confiding in this veritable stranger, lowering his plate once more onto the red laminate. A few examples wouldn’t hurt...

“Remember last year around this time, weather reports of freak storms and ground tremors?”

“I don’t get much chance to watch TV, but one of my colleagues filed a report about seeing a bolt of lightning originate from clear skies...”

Her mouth twitched and she pointed at herself.

“You? That’s impossible!”

“Check the records, if you want. Every incident took place within two miles of my parents’ house. As for what happened in Europe...”

“What *did* happen in Europe?”

“Lots of things.”

“The only record we have of you traveling abroad was a flight to Scotland...”

“Any record of me flying *back* from Scotland? Or to and from Rome?”

Fed up, Neville threw his napkin atop the half-eaten burger and tossed a ten dollar bill on the table. “You’re nuts, kiddo. Any statement you give about the horse thieves would be torn apart in court...”

He stormed toward the exit, pushing open the door when she yelled, “Stop!”

It took Mustang a few seconds to suck the last drops of her milk shake from the bottom of the glass, then she sedately walked past the counter out to the parking lot. She was already in the police car when Neville’s muscles again functioned, and he shoved his key in the lock.

“Oh, Christ!” he shrieked. “You’re a demon, or something...”

“Wanna call a priest? I don’t think an exorcism will help.”

“I’m taking you home, then I’m closing this case...”

“You can’t do that!” she protested. “The ranchers are depending on you people to find these crooks. If I’m the only witness, then I’ll be the most reliable witness ever. I don’t know why I told you what I did; others who’ve known wound up dead, mostly.” Lyndon Bixby, Wilfrid Bailey/ Jonas Fairchild, Rick Shimoto... “You seem like an intelligent guy, with an open mind - given your job is to collect facts and objectively put them together in a coherent way. I figured you’d sympathize...”

“It’s... a shock, that’s all,” murmured Neville. “I’m accustomed to dealing with sleazy types who can’t lie to save their lives. There you sit, telling me the truth... What else can you do?”

“I can travel through time.”

“Huh?”

“You wanted to know where I saw people killed? I lived through two years of the Second World War.”

“What, you’re a reincarnated Marine from the battle of Normandy, or Iwo Jima?”

“No, I shared the body of a Nazi sergeant.”

Neville bowed his head. “You really believe that?”

“I can prove it. The guy’s still alive, living not far from here, with scars matching mine on his hands. I can tell you what he did day-to-day, and what he said to Adolph Hitler that almost got him shot...”

“I could do the same, by reading a history book.”

“I don’t think historians would include him vomiting on the roadside in the presence of Field Marshal Rommel in their narratives.”

“Holy hell... Anything else?”

She snickered. “I think I made my horse talk today.”

“Talk how?”

“Talk English.”

Sensing himself on the verge of a nervous breakdown, Neville concentrated on his breathing. “Why don’t I take you home, and you can introduce me to this talking horse?” he said evenly.

“Fine.”

They drove in silence along country roads, pastures recently teeming with horses and foals now empty. Tires scattered gravel leading up to the Duryea home, where Maggie watered hanging plants on the porch.

“Dinner will be ready in a few minutes, hon,” the woman announced when her daughter alighted from the car.

“Okay, Mom. We’ve got to check something in the barn.”

Evening shadows cast bizarre images on the plank walls of the red structure. Neville trod gingerly through the straw, and Mustang laughed. “It’s clean. You won’t step in any... surprises.”

She didn’t head directly to the stall, first filling a bucket with water and grabbing a bag of oats. This wasn’t purely a social call on the horse.

“Ready for dinner, boy?” she greeted.

“I’m starved.”

Good thing the straw was fresh, because Neville found himself sitting in it. He watched Mustang fill the trough and the feed bag, his mouth trying to form the words reeling in his head. “You’re... a ventriloquist.”

“Nope,” she responded. “Feel free to search; there are no microphones or electronic equipment of any kind. Heartbeat is talking on his own.”

Neville snorted, “I thought you were going to say his name was Mr. Ed.”

“Watch it, buddy,” objected the horse.

“Sorry.”

“Heartbeat,” Mustang began, “this is Jim Neville, from the Montana State Police. He’s investigating the thefts. Since you were also a witness to what happened last night, you might as well tell him what you saw.”

“Oh, great, I can see the headlines: ‘Horse Testifies at Theft Trial,’” moaned Neville.

“Shut up,” cautioned Mustang.

Heartbeat whinnied. “If he’s not going to take me seriously, I won’t say another word.”

The girl stroked his nose tenderly. “It’s okay, boy. And, it’s important.”

“Why? So your dad can get his money back?”

“Of course not! You know I love those horses! I don’t want to see them hurt.”

The animal glared at Neville, still on the floor. “All right. Some of my best friends were out there... I’ll do it... for you.” He cleared his throat. “There were seven men, riding unbranded sorrel mares.”

Neville’s trembling hands had managed to locate his notepad and pen. “Unbranded?”

“Born wild, most likely,” Mustang supplied.

“Born wild, and meant to stay wild,” confirmed Heartbeat.

“What do you mean, boy?”

“When I ran off last night - I apologize for hurting you, by the way - I followed them. The men didn’t load the horses into any trailers or transport them anywhere. They drove them out to the state forest and turned them loose.”

“What, so they can round them up later to sell?” Neville inquired.

“No. So they can be free.”

“Who would be that stupid...”

“EEP.”

Mustang patted Heartbeat’s flank. “Excuse you.”

“Excuse me why?” ventured the horse.

“You burped. It’s rather impolite...”

“I didn’t burp, silly. I said ‘EEP’.”

“What does that mean?”

Neville provided the answer. “EEP is short for the Equine Emancipation Project. They’re a radical group of animal rights activists who believe horses have been exploited by humans for hundreds of years, and are determined to return them to the wild.”

“You already *know* about them?” Mustang demanded.

“The FBI’s been tracking them, actually. The horse thefts started in Texas a few months ago, and have been occurring further north with the warmer weather. We had no idea they’d come this far so fast. We thought it might be a copy-cat operation, given the publicity EEP’s been given by the media.”

“Don’t these idiots know the horses will find their way back to their homes?”

“Not if they’re supplied with plenty of food and water.”

Mustang turned to Heartbeat. “Could you lead us to where the horses are now?”

“I don’t know if I want to.”

“What? You can’t be thinking *we* exploited our horses...”

“Not you or your folks, but some of the other ranchers did. I’ve heard stories...”

“From who?” Neville prompted.

“Who do you think, smart guy? Horses living on the other ranches. What do you think we do out in the pasture, just eat grass? There’s more gossip passed around out there than in a beauty salon.”

The detective was genuinely apologetic. “I stand rebuffed.”

“And I stand on an empty stomach. Can we finish this tomorrow? I want my dinner.”

Neville nodded to Mustang, who strapped the feed bag over Heartbeat’s snout. She kissed the horse, then left him to his meal.

Outside the barn, the sun was setting. “I didn’t realize it was so late,” said Neville.

“Neither did I. I’ve got homework to do.”

“One more question before I go?”

“Sure.”

“Why ‘Heartbeat’?”

“His mother had a hard pregnancy. Unlike humans, it’s extremely difficult to get a horse to take it easy for any reason. He was almost still-born, and I spent more than an hour resuscitating him. Maybe because of that, he has the strongest heartbeat of any horse in these parts.”

Her words impressed him. “You really do care about them, don’t you?”

“They’re probably the only creatures I do care about.”

She waited on the porch steps until he drove away, then went in to her own dinner.

“You spent an awful lot of time with that young man today,” Joe Duryea remarked between bites of roast chicken.

“He had an awful lot of questions,” retorted Mustang. “He may already be on the trail of the guys who stole the horses.”

Maggie choked, “Really?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I knew when I first looked at him, he had the kind of smarts it would take to handle this,” Joe boasted.

“Brains, and good looks, besides,” added Maggie.

Mustang bristled. “What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. Just, if I were a young girl, and the prom was three weeks away...”

“Oh, come on, Mom... He’s near to 30!”

“Your father is eight years older than I am.”

The girl was not going to aggravate the situation by vocalizing her thoughts. Some nights, she wondered if the neighbors a half-mile down the road could hear the arguments, they were that loud. “The last thing I need is a guy in my life, any guy,” she conceded.

III

Drizzle made standing at the bus stop miserable the next morning. Mustang never bothered with umbrellas, usually enjoying the rain. This annoying spray, however, only gave her a chill.

The black Caprice braked beside her. The passenger window automatically lowered. Jim Neville offered, “Want a ride?”

“What are you doing here?”

“Twice a year, the state police inspect security systems at the high schools. If I’d checked my calendar, I would’ve remembered scheduling Canyon Creek this week, and done it yesterday when I was already there.”

The door unlocked, and Mustang climbed inside. “You look awful,” she observed.

“Thanks.”

“You sleep okay?”

“I kept having dreams about Mr. Ed. Frightening.”

She bit her lip to keep from laughing as the car sped through a curve.

“What about you? You seem a little pale..” hinted Neville.

“My mom’s started nagging me about the senior prom. She thinks every girl should go, because she didn’t have a chance when she was in school.”

“None of the boys have asked you?”

“The boys at Canyon Creek see me as a competitor when it comes to raising horses, not as a potential date.”

“Sweet sixteen and never been kissed,” the detective mocked.

“Shut up.”

Neville swung the unmarked police vehicle into the faculty parking lot, walking directly behind Mustang through the main entrance. His close proximity jangled her nerves; she sensed he wanted to prevent anyone from getting near her.

“This’ll take the better part of the day, so if you want a ride home...”

She veered along a side corridor to her locker. “No, thanks. I’ll catch the bus.”

Spinning the combination lock on the narrow, green metal door, Mustang glanced up to see Neville still standing at the intersection, staring straight at her. Whose security is he checking, anyway? she mused.

The rest of the day proved uneventful, a welcome relief, except for one odd incident. Dumping her textbooks in her locker before fifth hour study hall, the student assigned to the unit to her immediate right bumped her.

“Sorry,” he grumbled.

“No problem.”

Mustang didn’t dare say more, because she knew she’d hurt the guy’s feelings, no matter what. The popular clique called him “Nick the Geek”, a derogatory take on “Nick the Greek”, the famous gambler. He was sensitive and quiet, intelligent and gangly, with thick spectacles to correct an astigmatism. Though Mustang was an outsider herself, they were radically different in their views of life, and had nothing in common.

When he blocked her path, she tried to be polite. “You need something?”

“Can I ask you a question?” His tenor vibrated with fear.

“Go for it.”

“You going to the prom?”

“No.”

“Would you go with me?”

Her jaw dropped, and no words issued from her mouth. There could be no doubt whatever she did say, it would feel like a knife in his back...

“I... Can I think about it for a day or two?”

Nick managed a smile, his straight white teeth the product of extensive orthodontistry. “Sure. Just let me know by next Friday. That’s the last day to buy tickets.”

Glad she hadn’t upset him, Mustang headed for the study hall. She rounded a corner and saw Jim Neville duck into the principal’s office. Why the hell is he trailing me? she pondered.

Whatever the reason, the teen’s instructors began treating her differently. She felt like a leper, or someone with a terminal illness, they were so accommodating. If she didn’t turn in an assignment, she still received a passing

grade. When a group of students were caught cheating on a physics test, she was exempted from punishment, though she could have easily been accused along with the rest.

The girl stormed into the kitchen Thursday afternoon, slamming her backpack on the table. “Mom!”

Maggie appeared from the living room, bandanna tied around sandy curls, dustcloth in hand. “What’s the matter, hon?”

“You’ve got to call the principal, Mom. Something strange is going on at school, and I want to know why.”

The older woman’s voice cracked. “Strange?”

“Everybody’s acting like I might drop dead any second. I’m getting really pissed...”

“Take it easy, dear.” Maggie crossed to the refrigerator, pulling a slip of paper from behind a magnet. “Before I use the phone, why don’t you return this call.”

Tempted to crush the sheet in her fist, Mustang snatched the cordless phone from its cradle and trudged to her bedroom. She punched the buttons, preferring to punch the wall.

“Nick, it’s Mustang.”

“I hope you don’t mind me telephoning you,” the timid boy quavered. “I was curious if you’d decided about the prom...”

She had an idea. “I’ll give you my answer, if you tell me something.”

“If I can.”

“Have you heard anything around school about me?”

Silence on the line. Could the Geek be part of the conspiracy?

“Nick?”

“I’m here.”

“Well?”

“You know nobody talks to me. They talk *about* me...”

She had hurt his feelings, and accomplished nothing. “I’m sorry, Nick. I’ll be happy to go to the prom with you.”

“Great!” His tone brightened. “What color will you wear? I hear it’s traditional that couples match.”

“I don’t know. I’ll make a run into Helena this weekend, and see what I can find. I’ll let you know on Monday.”

Breaking the connection, she threw the phone onto the bed. “I’ll be in the barn, Mom!” she called, vaulting through the open window.

Had a casual passerby seen Mustang engaged in a heart-to-heart chat with her horse, she might've been deemed insane. As it was, the conversation was more enlightening than any other she'd had all week.

"I hate being treated like I'm different," she raged. "If I didn't know better, I'd think they found out about my power and are... afraid of me."

Heartbeat contradicted, "That's not it."

"How would you know?"

"Your dad was out here today, with Ted and Bill."

"And?"

"He showed them a newspaper, and made them swear to keep their eyes open."

"What did he do with the newspaper?"

The horse craned his neck toward the tack room. "He took it in there."

He was partially correct. A few sheets of newsprint lay on the plank floor; the others must've been used to protect the wood when her father polished his riding boots. Two sentences of an article caught her eye - the conclusion of a story on the horse thefts: "Elizabeth Duryea and her parents refused to comment on what she saw. The perpetrators remain at large."

"Oh, hell..." Mustang breathed.

"Trouble?"

"Maybe. If I know these reporters, they'll have included our address and a lot of other private details for all to read, including the thieves themselves. If they learn they were seen..."

"They might come back to... keep you quiet?"

She nodded. "Jim must suspect as much, and told the teachers, and the folks."

"If he did, it's only because he cares..."

"What are you talking about?" sniffed Mustang. "The only reason he'd give me a second thought is because he needs a witness to testify when those jerks are caught."

Heartbeat clicked his teeth together. "More people care about you than you realize. They care because of who you are, not what you can do for them."

She smirked. "That's kind of you, boy, but human beings aren't like horses." Her hand caressed his neck. "Which is why I prefer the company of horses." Leading the splendid mount from his stall, she swung onto his bare back and they galloped off, as one, across the fields.

Both were panting heavily on the return jaunt, when Mustang glimpsed a familiar black Chevy concealed behind a row of poplar trees near the road.

Tugging Heartbeat's mane, he swerved in that direction; the car pulled onto the pavement and accelerated.

Horse and rider gave chase. Modifications under the hood gave the vehicle superior power.

Not for long.

Mustang intended to yell, "Stop the engine!" A fly lodged in her throat, though, and the phrase came out, "Drop the engine!"

That's just what the car did.

All over the road - countless tiny pieces and one large steel chunk.

Seething with anger, Jim Neville stepped from the wreckage. His sport coat sleeve was shredded; the black silk tie hung askew. He marched toward where Mustang sat atop Heartbeat, coughing to clear the offending insect from her windpipe.

"Are you out of your mind?" he shrieked.

She shouted back, "It was an accident, dammit!"

"You might've killed someone!"

"It wouldn't be the first time."

A huge "Oops" echoed inside her skull. She jumped lightly to the ground and shooed Heartbeat in the direction of the barn.

"Will you be all right?" queried the horse.

She assured him, "I got myself into this; I'll get myself out."

Just as tired hooves trotted away, Neville confronted Mustang, seizing her shoulders with an iron grip. His brown eyes glowed with fury, partly obscured by the disheveled hair hanging past his nose. He gazed down at her, and she feared he might break every bone in her body.

"What right have you to destroy government property?"

"What right have you to stalk me?"

"I'm not stalking you," the detective replied. "It's called surveillance."

"It's a matter of semantics, if you ask me."

"It's the difference between threatening harm and offering protection."

She spat, "Protection? Where did you get the idea I need protection?"

"From a certain phone call we monitored the day after the *Helena Chronicle* broke the news about a witness to the thefts."

"What phone call?"

"Your father took it. When we couldn't kill the story, we tapped the lines. The male on the other end detailed some very unpleasant consequences if Joe didn't exercised his parental authority and make sure you forgot what you saw."

"Did the guy threaten just me, or the whole family?"

“I’d call torching the ranch a threat to the whole family, wouldn’t you?”

“Why didn’t you tell me this the day you so conveniently showed up to give me a ride to school?”

“Your parents thought it best you didn’t know. They didn’t want to make you paranoid...”

“So, *you* made me paranoid instead.”

Neville sucked air through his teeth. “This is a huge case, Mustang. If we can apprehend these fanatics, farmers in six states will be able to sleep again at night.”

“I’m the only witness?”

“Yes.”

Her head drooped. “Hell, hell, hell.”

Both at a loss for words, the lone sound for a time were the birds.

Gentle fingers eventually raised her chin. “Mustang, do you trust me?”

“Last person who asked me that, I jammed a knife in his heart.”

“Eh?” Neville recoiled.

“Never mind. Long story.”

“I need you to understand the combined forces of state and federal authorities are busting their tails to solve this case. We’ve already located the horses and have the site staked out; we’re pursuing other leads, as well. Another week should see the investigation completed and the culprits in custody. All you need to do is be yourself, and stay where watchful eyes can keep you safe.”

Oh, delightful irony! brooded Mustang. Solitude was her norm, keeping close to home, yet she’d made a commitment...

“I have to get into Helena on Saturday, to buy a prom dress,” she related. “Dad will be too busy to drive me, and I don’t want to put Mom in danger...”

“I’ll take you.”

“Huh?”

“I’ll play big brother for a few hours. Not like I haven’t done it before.”

“How so?”

“I’ve got three younger sisters.”

The mood lightened, they strolled toward the house.

“What about your car?” asked Mustang.

“I’ve already radioed in. Someone should be here to pick me up shortly. They’ll send a tow truck to clean up the mess.”

“How are you going to explain...”

“I’m no mechanic, so I won’t even try. Just do me a favor?” He spun the girl toward him. “Don’t ever do anything like that again.”

She shook free. "I told you, it was an accident."

"If that was an accident, I'd hate to see what you do on purpose!"

"Oh, go suck an egg."

Their eyes met in that moment, and Mustang felt the knot in her stomach redouble.

A white Chevy Caprice turned into the drive. Neville looked up and waved to his comrade. "I'll pick you up at 10:00 Saturday."

Reluctantly, she agreed. He jogged to the car and slid inside; the driver executed a clumsy U-turn and headed into the afternoon sun.

Mustang shuffled to the barn, to groom and feed Heartbeat.

Joe found her there. "Supper's ready," he announced.

"Almost done, Dad."

The teen paused in brushing the horse's glossy coat. An enigma, this man, her father. She presumed he resented the fact his only child had been born female. She had never seen him kiss her mother, but that woman had remained totally devoted to him for over two decades. At 45, he appeared far older, from the years of hard work on the farm. Maybe it was the ratty t-shirts and tight jeans he liked to wear, more the garb of a itinerant tramp than owner of a vast Montana ranch.

"I hear you've got a date for the prom," he muttered flatly.

"Uh-huh."

"Who is this boy?"

Mustang replaced the brush and bucket on a shelf outside Heartbeat's stall. "Nobody special. He has the locker next to mine at school."

"Even if he's nobody special, must I remind you of the conduct I expect from you?"

"You know me better than that, Dad."

"These past few months, I'm not so sure. You've seemed to... change."

Did she detect a twinge of emotion in his monotone? To avoid a prolonged account of her power, she bluffed, "I'm growing up."

"Maybe you are." He turned. "Just don't grow up too fast."

IV

Snow covered the ground Saturday morning, a late April reminder of how far north Montana is situated. Jim Neville pulled up to the Duryea residence in a shiny red Ford F-150. Instead of his work-a-day business suit, he sported a green polo shirt, khaki slacks and a black leather trench coat.

“That sure doesn’t look like a police cruiser,” Mustang blurted from the threshold, zipping her parka.

“This is what I drive when I’m out having fun.”

“Fun?” she challenged, skeptical. “Where’s your pistol?”

“If you must know, I’m wearing an ankle holster.”

Maggie came to the door when she heard the detective’s delightful bass. “I hope driving into Helena won’t inconvenience you too much.”

“I have some shopping to do myself,” he replied. “It’ll be good to have a little company.”

“You’re a poor liar,” chided the teen as the pickup cruised toward the city.

“What makes you think I was lying?”

“Men don’t go shopping on weekends. They rush in on their lunch hour and grab the first thing they see, which is why they always look...”

“Like they slept in their clothes?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I still look like that sometimes. Someone in my position has to present a professional appearance, according to the division captain. That’s why I need to buy a new suit in town, because a certain *accident* ruined the only one that fit me right.”

“I’ll shut up now,” she groaned.

The tension between the pair vanished when they arrived at the mall. Two kids in a candy store could not have enjoyed themselves more. Mustang hadn’t been to the complex in over a year, and couldn’t resist visiting the pet store and holding a cuddly black Cocker Spaniel puppy.

“Dogs seem to like you as much as horses,” Neville stated as the dog’s tongue assaulted her face.

“And I like them, but my dad doesn’t. He had a golden retriever a few years’ ago. Sam was hit by a car, and Dad mourned his death for weeks. Swore he’d never own another pet.”

“You could always tell him this one followed you home.”

“Not at eight hundred a pop. Mom told me I could use the credit card just for the dress and shoes.”

“Who said anything about a credit card?” Neville pulled a wad of hundred dollar bills from his hip pocket. “It’d be my present to you.”

She shook her head, and passed the puppy back to the clerk. “C’mon. I’ll let you buy me a chocolate chip cookie at the bakery.”

The selection of prom gowns, a week before the event, was severely limited. Mustang resisted as Neville tugged her into the most exclusive dress shop on the upper level. The cheapest off-the-rack white satin strapless carried a price tag of \$450.

“My folks would kill me if I came home with this!” she protested.

“It’s a once in a lifetime experience, Mustang. You’re worth the price, and far more.”

She squinted hazel eyes at him.

“Go on, see how it fits.”

That and two other choices were carried by the sales woman into a fitting room. Neville sat on an overstuffed chair until the girl reappeared.

To put it mildly, Mustang didn’t have enough cleavage to support the strapless design. She discarded that, and stepped into a flowing deep blue skirt, with spaghetti straps holding up the bodice. Her hysterical laughter caused Neville a bit of concern; she simply didn’t recognize herself in the mirror.

The combination of her flowing red hair and the blue fabric couldn’t have been more perfect. Neville rose, entranced, when she glided from the fitting room.

“Incredible!” he murmured. “No one would ever know you preferred the society of horses...”

She flushed and averted her face.

“Look, I’m sure these women can help you find shoes and all the do-dads to complete this outfit. While you do that, I’ll run out and grab a suit.”

More than ready to shed the feminine trappings, Mustang retraced her steps to the cubicle. She didn’t see him stop at the sales counter and tuck a stack of bills in the clerk’s fist. Nor did she suspect his plans included a search for no ordinary suit.

They ate lunch at the Chinese buffet in the food court, and wandered through the novelty stores with their parcels. Neville offered to let her stuff her own bear; she declined. “I’ve never been into plush animals.”

“I still think you should let me buy you that puppy,” he insisted, en route to the main exit.

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why are you being so excessively nice? The clerk told me you paid for the dress...”

“Why not? I want to stay on your good side, given what I’ve seen of you angry.”

Her rosy cheeks faded. “So, that’s it. You’re afraid of me, like everybody else.”

“You have to admit: what you’ve told me would frighten a less hearty soul, and what you *haven’t* told me smacks of the morbid.”

“You mean, about killing a man, and cooperating in the murder of thousands at Dachau?”

“For starters.”

“I don’t want to talk about it. I want the next week to be all it’s meant to be, everything my mom expects in the days leading up to the prom.”

Neville blocked her from grasping the handle on the passenger door. “You’re doing this to please your *mom*?”

“And for Nick. He’s a sweet guy, for a geek.”

“I don’t get you. You could do anything, go anywhere, have anything you want...”

She flashed her scarred palms. “It’s too painful.”

He retreated, bowing his head in submission.

They drove to the ranch in silence. Alighting near the barn, Mustang dared not reveal the secrets of her heart. Neville merely waved, making no mention of when he’d see her again.

Nick must’ve felt the same as she about the specialness of prom week. Though she assumed he avoided her at school because he was too shy, a box of Godiva chocolates arrived at the house by special courier on Monday. Tuesday, a dozen yellow roses awaited her on the kitchen table when she got off the bus. Wednesday, a gold bracelet with horse charms came in a small case.

She unwrapped the delicate lace shawl Thursday evening. Not cheap gifts, these; she wouldn’t have guessed his family was rich. Still, she had heard students mocking his plans to attend medical school - an expensive prospect, in itself.

Unlike other senior females, she didn’t skip half a day Friday in favor of a beauty salon appointment. She didn’t want to spend the evening worrying whether her hair-do was just right, deciding instead to let the waves naturally fall over her shoulders.

Joe and Maggie couldn’t believe the transformation. Tears welled in the woman’s eyes as she hugged her daughter. Smiling wider than the girl had ever seen him, he answered the door bell.

Jim Neville, wearing a dark blue tuxedo the exact shade of Mustang’s gown, held a small corsage box and wore a sheepish expression.

“Good evening, Mr. Duryea,” he greeted, the same as any high school boy would’ve done. “I’m here to take Mustang to the dance.”

“What the hell are you supposed to be?” she snorted.

Neville deflected the question. “We’re going to be late for dinner, if we don’t get going.”

Ceremoniously, Joe took Mustang’s hand and placed it in Neville’s. “You two have a good time.”

As much as she wanted to thrash out the mix-up right there in the living room, her father’s obvious pride stunned her into muteness. She permitted Neville to draw her onto the porch, and the door closed behind them.

“Will you *please* tell me what’s going on?” she hissed.

“Patience, young one. Your parents are peeking through the curtains. Don’t disappoint them.”

Gritting her teeth, Mustang accompanied him to the sleek black limousine. The chauffeur opened the rear door, and they ducked inside.

No one could see through the tinted windows; she erupted. “Are you out of your mind?”

Straightening his tie, Neville gazed straight ahead. “Nick found out today he caught chicken pox from his little brother.”

“Why didn’t he call me?”

“He was too embarrassed, so he asked me to stand in for him.”

“You can’t go to the prom. Security has been instructed to allow only Canyon Creek students or their pre-approved guests.”

“What if I tell you I was already going?”

“Huh?”

“Who do you think handles security at these wing-dings? Prisoners on work-release?”

“Oh, hell... You were going to be there anyway, watching me all night?”

He shrugged noncommittally.

Mustang choked back a sob.

“What’s wrong?” Neville prodded.

“To think, Nick wasted his money on these gifts...” The shawl was draped over her arm, the bracelet clasped around her wrist.

“He didn’t spend a cent.”

“What, he stole them?”

“No, silly. *I* sent them.”

She straightened on the leather seat slowly. “You? Why?”

“One, to make sure your mother enjoyed her daughter’s smile. Two, because even if Nick wasn’t ill, I would’ve neglected my duties checking student IDs and danced all night with you.”

“If you say anything else stupid, I may clock you one,” she warned.

“Can I help if I find you... intriguing? If you’re honest with yourself, you can’t deny you’re a unique individual.”

“I’m going to be sick.”

Neville’s head tilted, and a lock of black hair fell over his forehead. “You really never *have* been kissed, have you?”

“Not by anyone I really care about.”

“Driver, pull over.”

The limousine braked near unplowed farm fields. Neville had the rear door open before the chauffeur could slide from behind the steering wheel. Standing in the warm night air, the detective offered Mustang his hand.

“I’m not walking home,” she remarked, suspicious of his motives.

“Calm down, already. I want you to see something.”

They edged past a row of sprouting trees into open space. The clear night sky spread above them like a sparkling blanket.

“This is how I see you,” Neville confessed, pointing upward. “A dazzling mystery man may never fully understand. I can’t believe no one else has told you how beautiful you are...”

Touched by his words, she nonetheless knew he was caught up in the spirit of the event. “I’m not always dressed like this.”

“Clothes don’t matter, Mustang. Remember the first day I saw you? You were wearing that bulky green sweater and jeans. If not for your hair, it would’ve been hard to tell you’re female. Still, I was struck by your presence...”

“Not by me, by my power. That’s what radiates... and keeps most people from getting close to me.”

Neville cursed under his breath. “Why won’t you see?” He scanned the field in desperation. “I wish we had some music...”

“We have all the music we need - it’s called nature.” The teen gazed into the trees. “Maestro, if you please.”

A chorus of birds commenced a waltz-time melody, completely in tune.

“Where’d you learn to do that?” Neville puzzled.

“A wise man named Francis, in Italy.”

He didn’t catch the hidden meaning, sweeping her into his arms and dancing her across the fertile loam.

Mere speech would have been pointless. Mustang scrutinized Neville's countenance as he twirled her expertly past ruts in the ground. She had to agree with her mother's assessment: he *was* good looking, and exuded his own particular brand of masculinity. He reminded her of movie actors from the golden age of Hollywood, a "man's man".

Abruptly, a thunder of percussion disrupted their avian orchestra. The couple whipped around to witness a stampede of horses running west over a rise a quarter-mile distant.

"How close are we to the state forest?" asked Neville.

Mustang responded, "Closer than you think. This is what happens when a thousand horses are crowded into a small area. They get... restless."

"Or are being forcibly driven further into the wilderness."

She saw he was right - men rode a number of the animals.

Neville jerked his cell phone from his inside pocket so roughly, he tore the jacket lining. He punched buttons and held the device to his ear, then threw it in the dirt. "No signal."

"At the speed they're running, they'll be gone in a matter of minutes, unless we do something."

"They're too far away to shoot, even if I had a high-powered rifle."

"That's not what I meant."

He stared at her, suddenly nervous. "What are you going to do?"

"What I do best. Stand back."

The detective moved to the tree line, leaving Mustang alone in the field.

"I need the loudest voice possible," was the first command. The wind instantly shifted direction, blowing away from her, rather than toward her. She didn't even have to shout what followed, it carried so well. "My sisters, my brothers, come to me!"

In the moonlight, Neville glimpsed a ripple in the stampede. The riders no longer had control of the herd. Agile legs veered from their path and galloped toward the source of the voice. He extracted his service pistol from the shoulder holster, just in case...

All hell broke loose.

At least ten police cruisers converged around the limousine, lights flashing. Uniformed officers from various agencies rushed the field, toting rifles. Three all-terrain vehicles bounced over the field, keeping pace with the horses and those guilty of their thefts, who discerned they had ridden into an ambush.

The mayhem among the humans didn't phase the horses, who slowed to a canter and stopped a short distance from where Mustang had not flinched. Three

stallions, prize possessions of their respective owners, approached her and she acknowledged them equally by caressing their noses.

“How will we get them back where they belong?” asked Neville, coming up behind her.

“Simple. Call the ranchers and have them bring their trailers or their ranch hands out here. They can identify their stock by the brands and handle the move however they see fit.” The girl eyed him. “How’d you contact the police, if your phone was dead?”

“I didn’t. The boys on the ATVs had two-way radios, and were keeping in contact with their supervisors. When they saw the horses head for the road, they thought someone might get hurt. They had no idea a very lovely young woman had solved their problem without lifting a finger.”

He embraced her; she wriggled free.

“What’s wrong? Are you upset about the prom? There’s still time...”

“I could care less about the prom. More than anything, I’m glad the horses are safe, but it means... no more expecting you to pop up in odd places.”

“That’s not necessarily true,” said Neville.

“How so?”

“It’ll be months until these guys go to trial, and they’re bound to have... radical friends in their organization who don’t want to see them prosecuted.”

“And you’ll be hanging around to protect me until I testify?”

His tone grew playful. “Maybe.”

“I don’t get you.”

“Catching them red-handed this way, you probably won’t have to take the stand. The district attorney will want to be sure you’re available, though. As for me, I don’t need my boss’ orders to keep seeing you...”

Mustang let him draw her close. “Friends like you are rare,” she mumbled, resting her head on his chest.

“I think we’re more than friends.” He raised her chin and kissed her tenderly.

When a hush fell around them, the pair separated. Both police and criminals had paused to gawk at the spectacle. Neville and Mustang flushed simultaneously and hurried, hand-in-hand, toward the limousine.

Bright and early Saturday, the teenager threw on a flannel shirt and jeans, heading to the barn for a morning ride. Heartbeat wanted to hear about the prom, yet when Mustang recounted the excitement of the previous evening, his head sagged.

“What?” she queried.

“I thought they wouldn’t be caught. I hoped my friends would have their freedom.”

“Don’t you understand, it was too dangerous for them? Not enough food for so many, and what about poachers? Would you want to see your friends shot for no reason?”

If a horse can sigh, Heartbeat did. “I guess so.” He snorted. “If it’s all right with you, I’d rather not talk anymore.”

“Fine,” conceded Mustang.

“Not just this minute. I’d rather not talk like you do, at all.”

“Any particular reason?”

“Horses weren’t meant to talk like humans. It makes my jaw hurt something awful.”

The girl grabbed a brush from the nearby shelf and began grooming Heartbeat’s rump. “I hadn’t thought of that.” She whispered the words which followed, tears flowing down her cheeks. The horse whinnied and flicked his tail, content once more.

Before she left the barn after their ride, she hugged Heartbeat’s neck. For the first time since returning from Scotland, she recognized the power Jack Parsons bequeathed to her as an asset, not a liability.

The future stretched ahead of her, a welcome challenge.