

The Mustang Chronicles:

Mississippi Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

The string quintet, shaded from the afternoon sun by a white-washed gazebo, struck up *Pomp and Circumstance*. From a reception tent erected at the town park's edge, 132 teenagers in black caps and gowns processed along the middle aisle, past family and friends, to their seats. Perspiration flecked the graduates' faces on this very special, very hot June Sunday.

Mustang scanned the crowd. Her father's thinning hair and her mother's sandy locks indicated their position toward the front of the right-hand section. She sensed her ever-present protector, Jim Neville - the Montana State Police detective - also hovered nearby, though she couldn't locate precisely where.

Best to forget about the horse theft trial for today, she decided. Her struggle to reach this point in her life, especially after two years of harrowing events, was over and done. She'd never have to worry about school again, since she had no plans to attend college. She could concentrate on breeding and training the wild horses she loved so much, the source of her nickname.

Speeches given by Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High's principal and the valedictorian - Nick the Geek - were mercifully short. Then, the parade of young people began, receiving their diplomas and shaking hands with the mayor and school superintendent.

"Elizabeth Candida Duryea," the principal announced through the microphone.

Her fingers reached for the red folder at the same time a gunshot rang out.

The bullet pierced her right forearm; she cringed in pain and pitched into the row of students behind her.

Spectators, officials and graduates closest to her hit the ground, fearing additional violence. Others bolted from the park, accompanied by panicked screams. Above the din, no one heard Mustang shout, "Reveal yourself!"

A microburst of wind, originating nowhere explicable, rattled the wood gazebo and knocked over folding chairs en route to blasting every leaf off an ancient walnut above the rented tent. Frozen on a knotty branch fifteen feet above the ground, a man still peered through the scope of his Winchester rifle.

He *had* intended to fire more rounds.

Jim Neville, in shirt sleeves and dress slacks, and a squad of uniformed sheriff's deputies surrounded the tree, sidearms drawn. So stunned was the sniper by his sudden visibility, he relinquished his weapon and descended from his perch.

The commencement ceremony ended on that sour note. The students whose names started with letters E through Z picked up their diplomas, without fanfare, before leaving. An ambulance arrived, but Mustang refused a ride to the hospital. Her cap and gown discarded, she allowed the medics to secure a bandage over the two holes where the slug had passed completely through her tissue, then waved them off, against her parents' objections.

She had a thing or two to say to Jim, who waited on the fringes of the excitement, after directing the deputies to transport the gunman to the county jail.

"Some bodyguard you are!" she greeted.

He countered, "Thanks for that," pointing toward the naked tree. "He might've finished what he started, if you hadn't exposed him."

"Is he from EEP?"

Jim nodded his black, wavy mop.

"They really don't want me testifying, do they?"

"I think that's obvious. Bad enough seven of their members are going on trial for stealing horses; they're not sure what other dirt about their organization will be brought out in court."

Indeed, the Equine Emancipation Project had been "freeing" horses from Texas to Montana since the previous year, under the premise humans had been exploiting the animals for centuries. Their methods, however, left a lot to be desired, like some other radical animal rights groups.

Mustang was the only witness to their raid on her father's ranch - the only witness, period. When her name appeared in the *Helena Chronicle*, the group had threatened to burn the Duryea home if she didn't keep silent. When she'd also played a role in the capture of the men responsible, by chance being in the right place at the right time, the potential for danger increased.

To ensure the state's case against EEP, Jim had been assigned to shadow Mustang, surreptitiously at first. It hadn't taken the girl long to discover his ruse, and they'd grown closer than many friends.

Primarily because Mustang confided in the detective about her power.

He'd been skeptical about her story of visiting Scotland two years earlier, there killing occultist Jack Parsons - one of the founders of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in California - and inheriting his control of natural forces. Parsons had supposedly been killed in an explosion in 1952. She had proof, though, concealed in a secret compartment at the back of her bedroom closet. One evening the previous week, while her parents were in town buying groceries, she'd shown him Parsons' journals.

Jim had protested the entries dated after 1952 might have been forged. Mustang challenged him to contact authorities in Inverness, Scotland, checking

on a man named Jock White - Parsons' alias, courtesy of the FBI. "He's buried in one of the city churchyards, with his date of death listed as the 1970s. According to Ben Espinoza, the Fed I dealt with, they'd killed Parsons off that time because the KGB was getting too close to finding him."

As outrageous as the tale sounded, Jim had made a few phone calls in the days which followed, and posted a few e-mails. Every detail he uncovered fit the bizarre jigsaw Mustang had laid before him, though he could confirm only that Espinoza worked at the FBI academy as an instructor.

The mystery surrounding Mustang's abilities intrigued Neville. Her unspoiled innocence attracted him like a fly to honey. She'd more than proved to him one word from her rosy lips would drop a body, lifeless, in its tracks, yet she grew flustered when buying a prom dress.

The ambulance had vacated the park, so had all the people, leaving the reception tent empty except for trays of forgotten sweets, finger sandwiches and punch. Jim led Mustang inside, away from any prying eyes along the street.

"I've got something to ask you," he ventured, loading a plate with food.

She chuckled, "Doesn't anything ruin your appetite?"

"Gory movies, maybe, but not much else." He bit into a chunk of Swiss cheese. "You remember me telling you about my sisters?"

"Yes."

"Well, the youngest is getting married next Saturday. I'm supposed to be one of the groomsmen. Given what happened today, though, I won't be able to go, unless..."

"Unless?"

"Unless you go with me."

Mustang's hand paused above a chocolate frosted brownie. "Huh?"

"Connie's fiancé is from Hannibal, Missouri. His father is pastor of a Baptist church there, and my whole family is converging on the town for the festivities. Since the judge delayed the EEP trial until the end of the month, my district captain ordered me to stay on the case..."

"So, I'm interfering with your vacation now?"

Jim set his plate on the table and faced her. Every time his deep-set brown eyes focused on her, something inside her melted. It may have been because his lean physique exuded a masculinity and maturity suitable for a man in his thirties, or that his stern features clearly softened when he gazed down at her, being six inches taller.

"I want you to come," he whispered. "I want you to share this special occasion with me."

She challenged playfully, "To make up for missing the prom?"

"You regret what happened that night?"

"Except for having to constantly look over my shoulder for jerks with guns, no."

He caressed the gauze bandage gently. "Does it hurt much?"

"It's throbbing something awful," she admitted. "But not as bad as when I first got these." She turned her palms upward, studying the sizable scars which obscured the more natural creases of life and heart lines.

"You never did explain how you got those."

"You try grabbing a source of live electricity, and see how it chars the skin."

"Live electricity?"

"A lightning bolt."

Jim stammered, "How..."

"I don't know the exact mechanics, but all I have to do is say where I want to go and, *poof*, I'm zapped from where I am to my destination."

"I thought you said you don't need spells or wands..."

"I don't. It's just how nature reacts to that particular command, I suppose."

"What does it feel like?"

"Painful."

Jim drew her into a warm embrace. "You should never have to feel pain, of any kind," he murmured into her flowing red hair.

She didn't push away from him, resting her head on his chest.

"Will you come to the wedding with me?" he prodded.

"Getting out of town awhile may be a good idea. Give us both a chance to relax. When will you be leaving?"

"Tuesday morning. We need to be there in time for the rehearsal Friday afternoon."

"Having few relatives myself, I think I was six last time I went to a wedding," Mustang recalled, raising her hazel eyes to meet his. "This should be fun."

He kissed her briefly, interrupted by a familiar voice.

"Where are you, girl?"

Joe Duryea waited to drive his daughter home. He squinted at the pair when they emerged through the canvas flap. "Your mother and I have been searching everywhere for you, dammit. We thought those thugs might've kidnaped you..."

"Jim's been... protecting me," grinned Mustang.

Neville squeezed her hand in farewell and watched her climb into the battered Chevy Suburban idling at the curb.

"You wouldn't believe how many people we had to argue with on our way to the parking lot," Maggie Duryea complained during the drive to the ranch.

Mustang queried, "Why argue with anybody?"

"Because they blame you for spoiling the ceremony. Nick's parents told us outright you should've stayed home, rather than put your classmates in danger."

"Nick the Geek? That's crazy. How was I to know that guy was sitting in a tree hoping to assassinate me? I'm not the president, for crying out loud."

"At any rate, until this trial is over, you're not to set foot off our property," ordered Joe.

"That's not fair! Why should I be punished when I didn't do anything wrong?"

Maggie said, "It's for your own good, and to preserve our standing in the community."

"To hell with the community! I'm the one who saved their horses..."

"Those horses won't be worth much if their owners catch a stray bullet from some lunatic's rifle," replied Joe.

"Fine," Mustang pouted. "I'll just leave, then."

"You can't do that! What about the trial?"

"I'll be back in time to testify. But I've been invited to a wedding in Missouri, and no one can stop me from going."

"I'm your father, girl..."

"And I'm eighteen now, Dad. You can say no all you want, and you can even tell me I can't come home again, but I'm capable of making my own decisions."

Joe opened his mouth; Mustang saw Maggie lay a restraining hand on his arm. "Will you be going alone?" the woman asked calmly.

"No, I'm going with Jim Neville. It's his sister who's getting hitched."

"That's fine, then. Just promise us you won't take any unnecessary risks."

"What, like going for a swim in the Mississippi River?"

When the Suburban braked near the red barn, Mustang crawled from the back seat and rushed into the house. She slammed her bedroom door and flung herself on the mattress. Damn human beings and their inherent stupidity! she groaned.

By the time she awoke from her nap, the sky had clouded over, and a stiff breeze blew from the north. She glanced out her window as she stretched, and noticed her father hustling the foals and their mothers into the barn.

That meant one thing: a storm coming.

She was mounted bareback on her pinto Heartbeat five minutes later, riding to bring the stock in from the far pasture. Sundays not usually being busy beyond the feeding and watering, the ranch hands were given the day off. That left emergency duties like this to the elder Duryea and his daughter.

Both collapsed from exhaustion in the living room as torrential rains began falling outside. Maggie brought them tall glasses of ice water, announcing dinner would be ready in a matter of minutes.

Mustang wasn't hungry. In fact, her stomach churned with nausea. Bouncing up and down on a horse didn't help her wounds heal, and red blotches soaked through the bandages. Either way, she excused herself and hurried to the bathroom.

Instead of hearing her retching, Joe and Maggie listened to peels of laughter penetrating the walls. They glared at each other over the kitchen table, doubting their daughter's sanity.

Her mind hadn't come unhinged, though. Waiting for the inevitable, Mustang remembered her seasickness aboard Sean Forbes' ship *Freedom*, and inhabiting the body of Georg Schiller, a German soldier during World War II. Schiller had been quite the coward, even nervously instructing Field Marshal Erwin Rommel to stop the car bound for a meeting with Hitler, so he could vomit on the roadside.

That entire experience smacked of the surreal, but she felt older because of it. She'd spent two years in the midst of tank battles and political maneuvering, returning to present day only moments after initially defying space and time. A witness to cruelty no person should ever endure, she learned much about controlling her power, which involved not speaking impulsively.

Clenching her teeth, she unraveled the sticky gauze circling her forearm. The holes beneath were swollen and ugly. She dabbed clotted lumps with a damp washcloth, not the first time excruciating agony coursed through her slender frame.

"Heal," she breathed.

The elements heeding her directive dizzied her; she sat on the bathtub ledge, lowering her head to her knees.

A knock preceded Maggie's concerned voice, "Hon, are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Mom," Mustang gulped.

Her mother's middle-aged spread filled the narrow doorway when she lifted her head. Maggie's jaw hung open, blue eyes stared at the teen.

"Mom, what's wrong?"

"Your arm!"

Assuming the woman was sickened by the sight of the mangled flesh, Mustang covered the skin with the washcloth. "Sorry, I was just..."

Red-painted finger nails snatched the cloth. "I was there when... when..."

Maggie crumpled onto the tile floor in a dead faint. Mustang squatted beside her, tapping rouged cheeks. Then, the girl perceived the cause of her mother's trepidation: all sign of the bullet wounds had vanished.

"Oh, hell..."

II

Accelerating Maggie toward a nervous breakdown was not Mustang's intention. She hadn't told her parents about her power; Jack Parsons had warned her divulging the secret would merely cause trouble, and she realized from the start he'd been correct. Joe and Maggie - not the most open-minded couple - had supplied their own rationale for their daughter's abrupt return from Scotland, and believed her a run-away during subsequent prolonged absences, to Rome and Japan. When she would walk through the front door after unpredictable disappearances, her palms freshly damaged by the lightning bolt which had transported her, they welcomed her sedately and posed few questions.

Maggie accepted vague explanations for seeing Mahatma Gandhi roaming the house, or Lyndon Bixby's blood staining her daughter's shirt.

Mustang hadn't the slightest idea how to avoid a nasty confrontation now. The woman's eyelids fluttered after a couple minutes; brow furrowed with confusion.

"What happened?"

The girl offered her hand, pulling her mother upright. "You... passed out."

"I... You..." Clarity gradually dawned. Agile fingers seized Mustang's right arm, twisting it toward the light. "Not six hours ago, you were shot. I saw it; I saw the paramedics treat the wounds. Was I dreaming?"

"No, Mom. Let's just leave it I'm a quick healer."

"I don't think so, daughter." Joe watched the exchange from the bathroom threshold. "Too many strange things have occurred on this ranch since you..."

"Went to see Grandma in Massachusetts two years ago?" Mustang prompted.

His mental calculations of the time line screwed thin lips into a sneer. "Yes, that's about right. Your mother and I trusted you, knowing you'd tell us anything important..."

“But you didn’t trust *us*,” sobbed Maggie.

Mustang knelt beside her mother. “It’s not that, Mom. I simply can’t sit down and say, ‘Look, here’s what’s going on.’ It’s too weird...”

“You’re not on drugs, are you?”

“No.”

Joe interspersed, “You haven’t taken up with the wrong crowd, have you?”

“When have I taken up with *any* crowd, Dad?” she laughed.

“Don’t disrespect me, girl.”

She threw up her hands in resignation and pushed past him, mouth clamped shut to prevent herself from speaking angry words which might cause damage they’d demand she explain.

Tuesday morning couldn’t come fast enough. Mustang spent Monday in her room, packing her few good clothes in a backpack most recently used for school books. That task finished, she reclined on her bed and stared out the window. Getting away from the tempestuous relationship with her parents might soothe the tensions; she might decide to continue east from Hannibal and not come back to Montana at all.

Jim Neville helped her into his red Ford F-150 pickup as the sun rose. Reminiscent of a conversation he and Mustang had weeks earlier, it looked like he’d slept in his black t-shirt and tight jeans. A steaming mug of coffee was propped in the cup holder, beside a half-eaten bagel. “I hope you ate breakfast,” he said. “We won’t be stopping for a few hours.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Mustang responded. “Let’s get out of here.”

“That doesn’t sound good. Care to talk about it?”

“No.”

He outlined the itinerary as they swung south onto the interstate highway. “We’ll meet my sister from San Francisco in Cheyenne. Mom and Dad will pick up the caravan in Des Moines on Thursday.”

“Where do they live?”

“Minneapolis.”

“Geez, your family is spread all over.”

“Unfortunately, yes. Makes reunions tough, to say the least.”

“Where’d you live as a kid?”

His father a Marine, Jim moved from base to base as a youngster: North Carolina, San Diego, Okinawa, and Washington, D.C. Listening to oft-humorous tales of military screw-ups, Mustang studied his animated countenance. A rebellious lock of his black hair, usually parted on the left and combed off his forehead, tended to flop forward, making him look boyish, especially when his prominent cheekbones revealed themselves with his smile.

"When did you decide you wanted to be a cop?" she asked when he paused to sip his coffee.

"I didn't want to be just a *cop*. I wanted to be a detective. I read a lot as a kid - mysteries. Found I was good at observing people and events, seeing things others didn't. Using those skills as a part-time security guard in college, I prevented a couple major thefts. Three separate police agencies tried to recruit me, but I chose Montana."

"Why?"

"It's beautiful country, don't you think?" He pointed out the window at the passing vista. "Rather than be stuck in a city, with a cacophony of noise 'round the clock, here, my shift finished, I can sit on my porch and actually hear birds, and see deer roam the yard."

"You haven't had a day off in over a month. Don't you regret..."

He reached over and caressed her hand. "I don't regret one moment of the past six weeks. You've made my life far more interesting than I ever hoped when I signed on with the force."

Blushing, Mustang hastily changed the subject. "Tell me about your parents."

The truck pulled into Cheyenne's Best Western hotel parking lot at sunset. Jim recognized his sister's car instantly. The rooms reserved were next to each other on the second floor and, mounting the stairs, Mustang shivered.

"Jim, are we sharing a room?" she hissed.

"Would you mind if we did?"

"I... ah, no..."

He chuckled. "You have a room to yourself, actually. I'm playing guardian for my niece and nephews, so Jean and Glenn can enjoy a mini-second-honeymoon."

Jim's sister and brother-in-law, and their three young children, took to Mustang at once. They laughed and chattered over dinner at McDonald's, and ribbed each other about their personal quirks as only siblings can.

"I tried to dye my hair the color of yours," Jean noted, munching a salad. "In high school, I got tired of all the blonde jokes, y'know? I ended up two-toned, and was called 'Zebra-head' for the rest of the year."

"There are days when I hate my hair," confessed Mustang. "I stand out in a crowd like a sore thumb, when I'd prefer to be inconspicuous."

"There's nothing inconspicuous about you," Glenn remarked, himself somewhat nondescript with gradually receding, close-cropped dark mane, and a sturdy build. "I discerned it the minute we met. There's a spark in your eyes, and almost an electric glow around you..."

“Some scientist!” giggled his wife. “Makes you sound like a miraculous vision from beyond...”

Jim glanced sideways at Mustang, who forced a smirk. “C’mon,” he insisted, pulling her off the hard plastic seat.

“Where’re you two going?” called Jean as the pair hurried out the door.

They didn’t go far, settling on a small hillock behind the hotel. “You okay?” Jim inquired.

“Uh-huh.”

“It’s something you’re going to have to get used to. The people who are closest to you never really see you. Total strangers, though, will detect your... uniqueness, like I did when we first met.”

“Am I that transparent?”

“No, you’re that powerful.”

She sighed. Perhaps it had been a good thing she’d been isolated most of the past two years, learning from her mistakes how to control this power. Had she immediately been thrown in the middle of big city hustle-bustle, or interacted with vast numbers of people, she might’ve done considerably more damage, like a stray bomb.

Interrupting her reverie, Jim kissed her. “We’d better get inside. The kids will be going to bed soon.”

He left her at the door of her room, sorely tempted to abandon his responsibilities.

Inside the stark chamber, Mustang wished for a companion. The bed uncomfortable, having someone to snuggle might’ve helped her get some decent rest. She lay awake, rising when she heard a door squeak open and click shut. Peeking between the curtains, she saw pink skies in the east, and Jim, in t-shirt and shorts with a towel draped around his neck, moving toward the stairs.

She knocked on the glass, and he paused. “Where are you going?” she mouthed.

“Running.”

“Give me a second.” Sweats and a tank top doubling as pajamas, she ran a comb through her tousled curls and slid into her sneakers.

They didn’t run outdoors, however. The hotel had a gym, and they selected two treadmills to set their own pace.

Good thing, too, Mustang discovered. Jim would’ve far outdistanced her had they been jogging along a country road. “You do this every day?”

“At least three times a week.” He peeled off the sweat-soaked shirt, and she got her first look at his torso. Her eyes almost popped out of her head. Broad shoulders and tanned, rippling pectorals tapered to a narrow waist.

“How’d you manage to keep in shape while keeping an eye on me?”

“During the week, I ran while you were in class. On weekends, I took the liberty of using your family’s ranch as a cross country track, usually after you were safely in bed.”

“Resourceful,” she praised.

The treadmills slowed, and both patted rivulets of perspiration from their faces. Back upstairs, instead of leaving her at her door, Jim followed her into the room.

“The kids aren’t awake yet, so I’ll shower in here. Okay?”

The idea unsettled her, and she tripped on the carpet. “Sure... I guess.”

Maybe the fact Jim had three sisters put him at ease with females, Mustang speculated. She, on the other hand, had never even seen her own father anything but fully dressed. So, when Jim appeared, still dripping, a towel wrapped around his waist, she couldn’t stop her jaw from dropping.

“I forgot one thing,” he said.

“What?”

“My clothes.”

Recovering from her shock, she managed a weak snicker. He joined the merriment.

“Will you run down the hall and get my bag from the kids’ room? They should be up by now.”

She complied and, while he dressed, she jumped in the shower herself. The cold water reinvigorated her, but only temporarily. Right after breakfast in the quaint hotel dining room, she fell asleep as the truck sped east along I-80.

Nerves got the better of her as the day wore on. Knowing she would be meeting Jim’s ex-Marine father was a frightening prospect. He’d described his mother as pleasant and fun-loving; in regard to her sole male child, would her tigress’ claws be bared? the girl puzzled.

She had no clue how Jim would introduce her - a witness in protective custody, or the object of his affection? The biggest surprise came when no introductions were made at all upon their arrival at a historic red-brick bed-and-breakfast in the Iowa state capital.

“So, this is the young lady you’ve written us about,” greeted Amanda Neville.

Black hair cropped in military style, with a paunch belying his years of stringent training, Harvey Neville chimed in, “Your description didn’t do her justice, Son.”

“She’s... difficult to put into words,” commented Jim.

“Come on in, everybody,” Amanda said. “We’ve reserved the entire second floor.”

All evening, Nevilles wandered in and out of each other’s rooms, as if the structure were their own home. “This is the place we always stay when we travel,” Jim pointed out, seated next to her on a queen-size bed. “Usually, we’re on our way to Chicago, to visit Linda. She’ll be here late tomorrow, for that matter.”

Mustang shrugged. “I’m not used to the... big family dynamic. It’s always just been me, my mom and dad.”

“Having a big family can be advantageous, it can also be a royal pain. Sometimes, we’re so alike, you’d think we were clones. Other times, we kick, bite and scream, because we’re so different.”

“That was when you were young...”

“Not necessarily. We can still get under each other’s skin at the drop of a hat.”

The teen rose and closed the door. “What did you tell your parents about me?”

“Like I said, words don’t do you justice. I told them you’re very special, and I care about you a lot.”

“Another little sister?”

“No.”

“Then, what? Are you behaving this way to keep me calm, so I don’t cause you any problems before the trial?”

Jim bristled. “Is that what you think?”

“I don’t know *what* to think. I have feelings... I’ve never had before, and there are moments when I think you share those feelings. You’ve kissed me, but not like... like...”

“Like this?” Not with anger, but with passion did his mouth devour hers. Bottle rockets and bells the norm for many couples, for Jim and Mustang, the walls and floor tremored violently. They broke apart, and the phenomenon ceased.

“Damn, damn, damn!” Mustang swore.

Jim wasn’t upset, however. He grabbed her hand and yanked her down the corridor to the stairs. The B&B’s proprietors wore perplexed expressions when he rushed past them, Mustang in tow.

He halted outdoors in a rose-scented flower garden. “Here, the roof won’t fall on top of us.”

He hadn’t taken into account the earthquake, spontaneous combustion of nearby trees and subsequent rain and wind storm would wake the neighbors. The

authorities responded to a dozen phone calls in the span of a quarter-hour, unable to collect any viable data to substantiate the hysterical reports.

“Incredible!” revealed Jim, his hair dripping water on her shoulders as he gazed upon the radiant face cupped in his hands. “You are... You are...”

“Out of control?” Mustang moaned.

“Not at all. You’re beautiful, magnificent, stupendous...”

“Oh, shut up.” She stepped back, lips twitching between misery and joy. “Is this how it’s going to be, being close to you? If it is, I’m not sure...”

“The only thing you need to be sure of is that I love you. As for the rest, we can take it slow, until we figure out how to lessen these... emotional manifestations.”

“You mean that?”

“With every bone in my body.”

They kissed, lightly. Jim ushered Mustang back into the house then, requesting more towels from the even more baffled proprietors.

The entire Neville clan drove in caravan from Des Moines to Hannibal Friday morning. Summer construction season delayed their progress; they skipped checking in at their hotel, opting to head directly to Riverview Park, where the wedding rehearsal - and Saturday’s ceremony - would take place.

Both Linda and Jean would attend their sister as bridesmaids. Jim was a groomsman, with two other friends of the minister’s son. Along with the elder Nevilles, they hurried to find their places and make final preparations, while Mustang sat on the steps with Glenn and his youngest near a statue of Mark Twain. His six-year-old daughter and seven-year-old son would serve as flower girl and ring bearer for their aunt.

“Who’s that, Daddy?” the three-year-old burred, thrusting a chubby finger upward.

“That’s Mark Twain,” answered Glenn. “He’s the man who wrote about Tom Sawyer, Huck Finn, and the *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*.”

“He knows those stories?” Mustang queried.

“I read to the children every night. Twain’s stories are some of my favorites.”

The rehearsal was peppered with jokes and laughter from the Nevilles, and periodic glances toward Mustang by the rotund, bald Baptist minister. The girl recollected her high school religious studies course, with descriptions of the mostly southern Christian sect as overzealous and fundamentalist at times, and wondered if the man had sensed her power and labeled her under demonic influence.

She shifted her attention to the Twain statue. The man born Samuel Langhorne Clemens had been deemed different by some in his day - outspoken, brash. Writing in a truly American style, he became a nation's conscience, subplots highlighting prejudice and injustice infused with humorous banter.

The staging for the wedding resolved, Jim crossed to Mustang. "The rehearsal dinner's at a restaurant two blocks from here. Okay if we walk?"

"Shouldn't we freshen up a bit first?" Linda advised, coming up behind her brother. "The hotel's a mile down that way..."

Mustang agreed.

"We'll meet you at the restaurant in an hour!" Amanda Neville shouted to bride Connie as the group dispersed.

Jean and Glenn rounded up their children, bubbling with energy as always, and moved toward their car. Jim and Mustang lagged behind.

"Hope you weren't bored," he apologized.

"I'm never bored. I was thinking about Mark Twain."

"A worthy subject. Glenn researched him extensively as part of his undergrad studies at USC. He wrote a paper which was later published on a wide scale."

"I thought Jean said he's a scientist."

"Nuclear physics, to be exact. Starting grad school, he switched his major. No money in teaching English."

"Makes sense."

Jim peered over his shoulder. "I think it'd be neat to have the wedding here on the steps, with the statue as a backdrop."

"I can see why Connie chose to have things set up overlooking the Mississippi. Makes a gorgeous background for the wedding pictures. Besides, the statue could make some people nervous. It's so life-like, it looks like it could jump off the pedestal and start talking."

The river below the park kicked up a fuss at her words, and the grassy knoll trembled ominously.

"Oh, no..." Jim sputtered.

"Oh, yes. I did it again..."

III

Jim Neville stared in horror as a water spout formed on the surface of the mighty Mississippi and crashed ashore, impacting the Mark Twain statue with force unequalled. "Can't you stop it?" he hollered above the wind.

“I don’t know,” Mustang screamed in reply. “My instincts tell me it’d be like shifting a car into reverse while going sixty miles an hour. Not good for the transmission or the engine.”

As the water splashed noisily back to its source, the pair sank on the steps leading to the vacant pedestal. The bronze image was gone, and Mustang could concoct no feasible story to tell the authorities when they inevitably arrived to investigate.

“Well, well,” came an accented tenor. “Two young lovers enjoying the evening breeze.”

Simultaneously, Jim and Mustang jerked toward the voice. The shock of white hair crowning his head and matching the bushy mustache, Mark Twain stood above them, long white suit coat open, vest buttoned, hands buried in the pockets of his trousers.

“I don’t mean to disturb your tryst,” Twain continued, “but might you tell me how I come to be here?”

Jim turned to Mustang. Desperate, she bluffed, “Haven’t you come back to visit your boyhood home, Mr. Clemens?” The structure was preserved as a museum in the town.

“Not as I recall. Last thing I remember is sitting on the porch in Hartford, with some artist sketching me for a statue. Am I ill, perhaps, and suffering delirium?”

“No, sir,” Mustang stated, rising. “You’re the victim of a... lamentable accident. And your presence in Hannibal could have unpleasant consequences. Do you mind if we go somewhere... less public?”

“Anything, dear child,” conceded the gallant author. He crooked his elbow and tucked Mustang’s arm through, strolling toward the road without a worry in the world.

Jim brought up the rear, whispering in Mustang’s ear from behind. “Where are you taking him?”

“To the hotel, where else?”

“What about the rehearsal dinner?”

“You go without me. We can’t leave him alone...”

“How will you... get him back where he should be?”

“While I’m keeping Mr. Clemens company, I’ll work out something.”

Wedged together on the seat of the F-150, they drove to the 19th century-style hotel on the edge of town. Twain had been alive when horseless carriages were first invented, so he wasn’t overwhelmed by the technology. The desk clerk, on the other hand, questioned Jim at length when she glimpsed the author waiting in the truck.

“He’s an impersonator from Chicago,” the detective lied. “He’s entertaining at the wedding reception tomorrow night.”

“He travels around in costume?”

“Why not? Gives people reason to do a double-take.”

“That’ll be an extra thirty dollars,” announced the clerk.

“He’s not staying here. We’re just going through his act, to make sure he gets the names of the wedding party right, and all.”

“If he’s not gone by ten o’clock, I’ll be knocking on your door...”

“He shouldn’t be here more than an hour,” Jim assured her.

Stressed, Neville trudged out to the pickup. He snatched his suitcase from behind the driver’s seat. “I’m going to jump in the shower, and head to the dinner.” He led his companions to the room and slid the key in the lock. “You two stay in here and... don’t open the door or answer the phone.”

The water splashing from the shower head, Jim didn’t hear when Mustang switched on the television. The evening news on three networks from St. Louis already carried reports on the missing Twain statue.

“Oh, hell...” The teen buried her face in her hands.

Things grew worse, rapidly. Amanda and Harvey Neville were shown, surrounded by cameras, giving a statement. Harvey read, “Our family, and that of our future in-laws, were involved in a wedding rehearsal at Riverview Park late this afternoon. The image of Mark Twain had not been tampered with while we were on the property. We suspect the vandalism took place after we departed.”

“It was that girl!” shouted the groom’s father, the Baptist minister. The cameras panned to him, standing on the fringe of the crowd. “She was sitting near the statue during the rehearsal, behaving suspiciously...”

“Suspiciously how?” inquired a uniformed police officer.

“She came to the wedding with our son!” Amanda protested. “All she was doing is talking to our other son-in-law...”

“There’s something definitely odd about her,” persisted the minister. “I suggest you bring her in for questioning, and get to the bottom of this!”

The heated exchange took less than a minute, with excerpts repeated over the course of the 90-minute broadcast. Even CNN picked up the story, with consultants brought in to analyze how a statue of such size and weight could be stolen in broad daylight, without the use of a crane or semi-trailer.

Jim stood, towel wrapped around his waist, glaring at the television. “You’ve got to do something, Mustang!” he barked. “My parents will never forgive me if Connie’s wedding is overshadowed by this...”

Twain, entranced by the “movies in a box”, shifted his attention to the girl. “A pretty child like you deserves a more feminine name than Mustang.”

“Officially, I’m Elizabeth Duryea, Mr. Clemens.”

“Elizabeth. Ah, that’s much better.”

She actually enjoyed the genial inflection when he spoke the name, unlike teachers and doctors who’d addressed her over the years. “I’m glad you like it.”

“Elizabeth,” snapped Jim. “May I speak to you privately?”

Mustang excused herself and was shoved into the bathroom. Jim closed the door and, in the cramped space, the two stood nose-to-nose.

“Do you realize how much trouble we’re in?” he demanded.

“No more than I’ve been in before.”

He emphasized, “Except, you’re not *alone* this time. My whole family is under investigation, and when the local police learn I’m a peace officer myself, don’t you think my district captain back in Butte will get wind of this?”

“What do you want me to do, disappear?” choked Mustang.

“No, fix it! And fast!”

“I’m trying, but you keep distracting me!”

“All right! I’ll get out of your hair, and see what damage control I can do in town...”

He stormed from the tiny room and had his hand on the knob leading outside before he realized he wore no clothes. Cursing under his breath, he returned to the bathroom. Two minutes later, he emerged wearing his blue wool work suit. He tucked his pistol in the shoulder holster.

“You’re not going armed?” Mustang objected.

“The mood I’m in, I’ll shoot the first person who mentions this mess.”

The door slammed; the pickup squealed its tires racing from the parking lot.

“My dear Miss Elizabeth,” Twain said, switching off the television.

“Why is your young man’s dander up?”

“Because I did something stupid, and it’s not the first time.”

“Is there anything I can do to help rectify the situation?”

“Oh, yes, Mr. Clemens, if you don’t mind taking a walk with me.”

“I would be delighted, my dear. I ask only one favor.”

“What’s that?”

“To smoke the choicest Havana while we enjoy the night air.”

“I don’t know where we’d buy one at this hour...”

“There used to be a tobacconist shop on Main Street. Mayhap he will open his doors to us on this special occasion.”

Mustang had a thought. If Mark Twain had a penchant for cigars, would he not keep a supply close at hand? “Have you checked your inside pocket?”

Nimble fingers extracted a long, thick cigar from within the coat, Twain's face lit with glee. "Now, all I need is a match..."

"That part is easy." Together, they left the hotel room and strolled through thick, humid air toward the road. Mustang picked up a thin twig and held it toward the author. She commanded, "Light," and a small flame engulfed the tip.

Twain puffed the tobacco into a red glow, exhaling with a satisfied grin. "Let us be off, Miss Elizabeth."

Arm-in-arm, the pair discussed world politics, scientific progress and Halley's Comet en route to Riverview Park. Twain deemed himself quite special for having been born the year the latter passed within sight of the earth, dying on its next orbit. "You, too, are quite special, my dear. So is that young man of yours."

"How so, Mr. Clemens?"

"He is very passionate about life, and cares deeply for those close to him - yourself included. The majority of people, even in my day, refused to think for themselves or act on their beliefs."

"The more the world changes, the more it stays the same," she remarked.

"Exactly."

Coming in sight of the park, Mustang halted in her tracks.

"What's wrong?"

"The police. They've roped off the property as part of their investigation."

Twain considered, then stubbed out his cigar on the gravel pavement.

"You mind getting your feet wet?"

"No... What have you in mind?"

"The police can't rope off the riverbank."

They crept through the underbrush to the Mississippi's uneven shoreline. Not only their feet got wet, but also their knees. The ascent to where the pedestal awaited its occupant made Mustang's legs ache.

Twain wasn't impervious to the discomfort, either. "I'm getting too old for this," he chortled. On level ground finally, he added, "How do you intend to get me back on my perch? I can't climb in my condition..."

"That which brought you down, shall raise you up - I hope," answered Mustang.

"You have experience in these matters?"

"No. Still, there's a first time for everything."

At that particular moment, there was no time for anything. Sirens blared and flashing lights illuminated the night.

“I believe representatives of the law will soon be upon us,” Twain declared.

Mustang tugged him by the coat sleeve behind the cement pedestal. “Are you ready?”

He nodded.

“It’s been a privilege meeting you, Mr. Clemens.”

The renowned author scooped up her hand and kissed it. “I’ve enjoyed this brief encounter tremendously.”

Two-way radios and flashlights disturbed Mustang’s concentration, and she was fully aware vagueness meant disaster. Closing her eyes, she inhaled deeply. When she spoke, her contralto rang firm and confident.

“Restore this Mark Twain statue to its pedestal, in the final form shaped by its sculptor, as I first saw it at three o’clock this afternoon.”

The spray of polluted Mississippi River water caused the police to retreat, while soaking Mustang from head to foot. Once she blinked away the moisture, she saw the bronze image intact ten feet above her.

“What the hell...” she heard a man shout.

Another voice cried, “You said the statue was gone, you idiot!”

“It’s back, and I need to be gone,” Mustang mumbled. “I wish I was invisible.”

This no accidental statement, she extended her hand past the pedestal’s corner and saw a flashlight beam pass right through it. She jogged down the steps, across the park and into the heart of Hannibal proper. Near a Main Street souvenir shop, she rested against the stucco wall. The restaurant where the rehearsal dinner was in progress lay half a block east.

“I wish to be visible, dry, groomed and wearing respectable clothes.”

She glided into the private dining room wearing a tailored black dress suit and cream silk shirt, red hair cascading down her shoulders. All conversation ceased; the teen assumed the minister had been hard at work influencing his relatives about the cause of the theft.

“While I have your undivided attention,” she began, “you probably want to know Mark Twain is right where he should be - in Riverview Park - and the police will soon close their investigation, labeling the ordeal a practical joke in poor taste.”

Jim joined her at the door, kissing her cheek. “Thank you,” he muttered in her ear. “And I’m sorry if I...”

“We stood beneath the empty pedestal,” proclaimed a young man. “How can it have reappeared?”

“Mirrors,” Mustang lied. “The police think some college students were fooling with oversized mirrors to create an optical illusion.”

Amanda and Harvey rose and shook Mustang’s hand. “We’re so happy you weren’t involved,” gushed Jim’s mother. “Did the police question you?”

“No need.”

“Well, there is a need to introduce you to everyone,” Jim said. He guided her past his family to the head of the table. “Elizabeth Duryea, this is Reverend Ted Karmolinski and his wife, Vivian.”

The plump couple might’ve been a matched set of salt and pepper shakers, alike in every feature, except their hair. He had none; she sported an elaborate brunette coiffure. She barely touched Mustang’s outstretched fingers, he not at all.

“Pleased to meet you,” Mustang oozed. “I apologize for being late. It’s been a crazy day.”

“Better you had not come,” responded Vivian.

“Mother!” the groom scolded, who was presented to Mustang as Rick Karmolinski.

Ted growled, “Her kind aren’t wanted here, Son.”

“My kind of what?” Mustang prodded.

“Those who prefer the agency of the most high God’s heinous enemies.”

“Oh, hell...”

“That’s exactly where you’ll end up, if you don’t make amends.”

Jim leaned close and stroked her arm. “These are Rick’s cousins, the other groomsmen, Walt and Dave.”

Both favored her with genuine smiles. Maybe they had brains enough not to heed their uncle’s outrageous accusations.

“Come, sit by me,” urged Amanda.

Harvey pulled out the chair beside his wife, and Mustang dropped on the cushion. She’d only seen tables this elegant in old movies. Linen tablecloths and napkins, gold-bordered china plates and polished silver cutlery...

“You missed the salad, but the main course should fill you up,” Jean related.

“I’m starved, that’s for sure.”

“Strange,” Glenn sniffed. “Any reason you should smell of cigar smoke?”

“Our hotel room reeks of it,” Jim blurted out.

The wait staff served prime rib, baked potatoes and buttered asparagus, bartenders filling crystal glasses with red wine. Mustang glanced up from cutting the meat to see Ted Karmolinski’s smoldering grey eyes upon her. Neither he nor his wife had touched their forks.

“Dad, you’d better eat before it gets cold,” advised Rick. “It’s fantastic.”

Ted snorted, “We do not break bread with servants of Satan.”

Having exerted herself to ensure the nuptials were not spoiled through any fault of hers, Mustang resented this man creating friction due to sheer ignorance. She laid her knife on the rim of her plate methodically. Opposite her, Jim caught her eye, mouthing, “Don’t do anything impulsive.”

She blew him a kiss, then aimed her words at the offending fanatic. “Ted, normally such nonsense would merit no reaction from me. Rick and Connie deserve an abundance of joy in celebration of their union, however. So, my suggestion to you is: zip it, until you understand the delicate truth life has to offer.”

IV

Either the pastor was duly rebuffed, or his tongue had been silenced by force, for he spoke not another word the rest of the evening. He did write his wife a note, “How can the evil one thwart the righteous dictates of a devout vassal of Jesus Christ, our Savior?”

Mustang read the chicken-scratch when she and Jim came around the table to bid Rick and Connie farewell. Too bad Karmolinski couldn’t tell the difference between evil and the inexperience of youth, she mused.

The red pickup cruised past Riverview Park, where frustrated deputies had ripped down the yellow crime-scene tape, leaving scraps on utility poles, fluttering in the wind. The bronzed Mark Twain looked no worse for wear after his respite in reality.

“Are you mad at me?” hinted the teen. “You didn’t talk much at dinner.”

“Around my sisters, it’s tough to get a word in.” Jim patted her leg.

“Frankly, I was too tense for polite conversation. I half expected your friend, there, to waltz through the restaurant door any moment...”

“I made damned sure he stays put.”

“Doesn’t such an effort burn up a lot of your energy?”

“It’s not *my* energy. It’s nature.”

“You do realize the need to limit your use of it, don’t you?”

What she did realize is he was trying to steer the discussion. “Why?”

“Because the FBI has a surveillance order out on you.”

“Huh?”

“In the course of his investigation, the county sheriff ran background checks on everyone who was at the park today. I don’t think he knew I could

read the computer screen from where I was sitting. The Fed's have been compiling information for over a year."

"Espinoza's a lying..."

"There are entries on every inexplicable event which has taken place in a ten mile radius of your parent's ranch - including the little incident with my car."

Mustang blushed in the darkness. She'd wanted to stop the vehicle, not have the engine fall out in a thousand pieces. "You know that was an accident."

"I know it, and you know it. Those 'accidents' are going to land you in serious trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

Jim parked the F-150 in the hotel lot, leaned over and opened the passenger door. "Maybe you'd better re-read Parsons' journals when you get home."

"They wouldn't..."

"Don't think they wouldn't," the detective corrected. "Though he didn't sign the entry, it must've been Espinoza who authorized DNA tests in Scotland to confirm what you may have already suspected..."

"Where'd he get my DNA?"

"A saliva test, apparently. Having to do with someone named Fairchild?"

"That bastard!" Mustang didn't have to search long for the memory of the psychotic murderer sedating and transporting her to the Helena jail. While she'd been unconscious, Espinoza must've...

"The results were indisputable," Jim concluded.

"Parsons *is* my grandfather?"

He nodded.

"Oh, hell..."

In the hotel room, air conditioning provided relief from the summer swelter. The pair took turns using the bathroom to change into pajamas - Jim's a pair of green gym shorts, Mustang's an oversized Vatican flag t-shirt. He sat on one double bed when she returned, watching the late news from St. Louis. "The networks killed the statue story," he observed. "Not even a wisecrack about the Hannibal residents needing their eyes examined."

"Good." Solemnly, she threw back the sheets and slid onto the second mattress. "Have you left a wake-up call?"

"For eight o'clock. I thought we might want to go jogging before dressing for the wedding."

"We'll see."

"Good night."

He switched off the wall sconce and settled on the pillows. Sleep didn't come, though, and he soon heard Mustang's muffled sobs. He left his bed to sit beside her, gently rubbing her shoulder. "Hey, it's not that bad."

"Not that bad? All my dreams of a quiet and peaceful life have been shot to hell. I finally finished high school, getting my parents off my back, and I was beginning to believe I had control over my future and my power... Now, this!"

"It's an easy enough problem to solve..."

She blinked away her tears. "You mean, you'd sanction me wiping out the national police database?"

"No, of course not!" Jim chided. "All you have to do is stop using your power, and the FBI will eventually leave you alone."

"Oh, right. Just like they let Parsons alone. Every year, they sent agents to check up on him, and he wasn't using his powers..."

"Okay, okay. You can't let it get to you, though. It'll drive you nuts."

"Like having you following me has made me nuts?" she mocked.

"Has it?"

"At first, it did. Then..."

He grinned, even if she couldn't see him. "Then, what?"

"I'm here, aren't I?"

Firm hands raised her off the mattress and he kissed her. They spent the remainder of the night in the same bed, cuddled together. Mustang slept soundly, while Jim remained awake, contemplating his own future.

Low altitude clouds obscured the sky Saturday morning, and the cable weather network showed blobs of rain approaching with a cold front from the northwest. Relief from the humidity might be welcomed by most in the "Show Me" state; Jim prayed it would hold off until Sunday, so his sister's wedding would be dry, if not sunny.

"Can you do anything about this?" he inquired on their way to a nearby diner for breakfast.

Mustang chuckled at the irony. "You're the one who told me to *stop* using my power!"

"Starting tomorrow."

"It may clear up by noon."

"We'll wait and see, then. If it's still threatening, what will you do?"

She teased, "Most likely, I'll whisk away the clouds with hurricane force winds, or burn off the moisture by setting the sky afire."

Jim had to do a double-take to see her lips twitch upward at the corners. "I have no doubt you'd do it, too."

“If I wanted to put on a fine show, and get myself shanghaied into oblivion by the Feds.”

“Best to make it look natural...”

“Effortless...”

“Accidental.”

Peels of laughter echoed along the quiet road, and the waitress who greeted them at the diner's front door let her own smile fade to a quizzical stare.

In anticipation of the long afternoon ahead, Jim made short work of a platter heaped with eggs, bacon, sausage, pancakes and toast. Mustang contented herself with a glass of orange juice and two blueberry muffins. Strolling back to the hotel, they listened to the Mississippi River pushing its way to the Gulf of Mexico, a thousand miles to the south.

“Do you think you could reverse the water's flow?” asked Jim.

“I don't know. On good advice, I haven't tried to pit nature against itself. Last thing I want are those forces turning against *me*.”

“Wise decision.” He turned the key in the lock and waved Mustang across the threshold. “You first in the shower, or me?”

“I think my hair will take a bit longer to dry than yours.”

He kissed the red tresses lightly. “Go ahead. I'll watch cartoons.”

Fifteen minutes later, Mustang found him engrossed in an episode of the Flintstones. For all his masculine charm and handsome features, the fact he appreciated simple pleasures fascinated her.

“Wow!” he exclaimed, as she brushed her hair in front of the mirror.

“What?”

“If you wore that towel to the wedding, nobody would look at the bride.”

Her self-assessment had always included points like “good with animals” and “physically strong”, but not pretty. Looking at her reflection now, through the eyes of the man standing behind her, Mustang couldn't deny the pleasant view.

They left for the park at noon; ominous clouds still hovered overhead. Jim opted to wear a t-shirt and carry the pale blue tuxedo jacket, white shirt, cummerbund and tie, rather than be soaked in sweat before the ceremony began. Mustang wore a calf-length green peasant skirt and yellow scoop-neck blouse.

Preparations were in the final stages, with florists waiting until the last minute to pull the bouquets and larger arrangements from their van, for fear of the blossoms wilting in the heat. “It's going to be intolerable, if it stays like this,” Jim stated.

“Are you trying to be subtle?”

“Not necessarily. I just want Connie's big day to be special.”

Before Mustang had the chance to cool the temperature, the groom arrived in a vintage white VW Beetle. He wore a polo shirt with his tuxedo slacks, the rest of his outfit in a protective plastic bag.

"It doesn't look good," commented Rick.

Jim replied, "When Mustang's around, things are never dull."

"Speaking of which, my dad's been acting... different since he talked to Mustang at the rehearsal dinner."

"Insulted, you mean," she muttered.

"His words were harsh, but you don't know him like I do. He grew up poor in Atlanta, and the only hope he could hold on to was God. He really believes the Almighty raised him from a bad lot to convert the world."

"Do *you* believe it?"

"No," Rick admitted. "He doesn't know I don't attend church anymore, to be honest. When Connie and I told him we were engaged, he insisted on performing the ceremony himself. To keep the peace, we agreed. Only, he seems to have laryngitis, or something..."

Jim sighed. "You've got more than just the weather to fix, eh?"

"Where is he?" asked Mustang, resigned.

"He's waiting in the shop across the street," Rick answered. "It's air conditioned, and the owner is one of his congregation."

"I'll be right back."

The guests beginning to gather, Mustang dodged oncoming cars, traversing the pavement to the rustic curio emporium. The light dim inside, she didn't immediately see Ted Karmolinski.

"Hello?" she called.

A cheery woman poked her head through a set of dark curtains. "Hello?"

"Is the reverend here?"

"He's in here, drinking a soda."

Mustang followed the woman into the back room, a combination office and lounge. The minister sat on a ratty sofa, a glass of clear, carbonated liquid in his pudgy hand.

"I need to speak with you," she announced.

The shop owner countered, "He can't speak."

"Fine. I'll speak, and he can listen. Will you excuse us?"

"I'll be out front, if you need me."

When the curtains stopped rustling, Mustang dropped onto a tattered ottoman. She had no reason to be diplomatic, and didn't like playing games. Yet, there might be no other way...

“Imagine it's Sunday, and you're in church. I'm the guest preacher, and I've got two lessons for you from that book in which you put such great faith. The first comes from Genesis: 'In his image he made them, man and woman.' If all humans beings are made in God's image, then they're all equal. All, you hear me? You have no business deciding someone is inferior because they're different. Second lesson: 'Love thy neighbor.' It doesn't say, 'Love thy neighbor when he conforms to your beliefs.' The hatred you harbor in your heart for people you don't understand violates this tenet in the most basic way.

“The reason you are silent is because your words do nothing more than contribute to noise pollution,” she continued. “If your Jesus Christ were here right now, he'd probably clock you one upside the head for misinterpreting his message and being so stupid.

“You going to think about what I said?” she demanded.

He nodded once.

She knew Karmolinski would forget the conversation as soon as his tongue was restored. Having a chance to voice her opinion, uninterrupted, made the day worthwhile. If only more “men of God” were like Francis of Assisi, the humble saint who lived in harmony with nature and all life. Conversations with him during her time in Italy promoted tranquility instead of strife. Opportunists and media giants, however, managed to distort even that.

“All right, then. Take a drink, and try talking.”

The pastor sipped from the glass and cleared his throat. “Testing one, two, three.” He smiled just for an instant, then grew serious again. A glint of uncertainty shone in his eyes.

“You go on fearing me,” Mustang concluded. “If that will convince you to mind your tongue, I'll be happy with the result.”

The girl brushed between the curtains, forcing the eavesdropping owner into a rack of porcelain bric-a-brac. Outside, the chairs set up in the park were filling quickly; she needed to find a seat with a good view of Jim.

He intercepted her near the Mark Twain statue. “Walt just checked the radar on his cell phone. Severe thunder storms are less than an hour away...”

“Don't you trust me?”

“Yes, I...”

“Go, enjoy yourself. Leave the details to me.”

Jim glanced up at the bronze image. “As long as there aren't any... accidents.”

“No accidents. I promise.”

A unique prelude, on guitar, and the Wedding March played on flute and oboe. Connie, protected by air conditioning until the last possible second, glided down the aisle, her lace-accented dress floating along the pale green runner.

The color of the bridesmaids' off-the-shoulder dresses matched exactly the groomsmen's tuxedos. Even Ted Karmolinski wore a stole of the same fabric. Connie's bouquet boasted green carnations and host of plant leaves. Rick wore a sprig of ivy in lieu of a boutonniere.

Mustang was impressed; the whole ceremony was environmentally friendly. Even the minister showed reserve in his remarks.

The clouds didn't, though.

Fortunately, the impending downpour warned those at ground level by releasing stray droplets on the park. Mustang caught one directly in the eye, and knew what to do.

"Let the rain fall as daisy petals on the wedding party and their guests," she commanded.

So, as the curio shop owner watched from the sidewalk, she was quickly drenched, while a flurry of white petals blanketed the ceremony's climax: "You may kiss the bride."

Karmolinski, eyes wide open, gazed past the embracing couple to Mustang's seat. She smiled, and he blushed.

Maybe he got the point, she pondered.

The fanfare and posed photos complete, the wedding party moved toward a row of limousines waiting at the park boundary. No more had the rear doors slammed shut, than the rain let loose. The respective chauffeurs' black uniforms were soaked when they slid behind the wheel.

Jim elected to drive his F-150 from Riverview Park to the reception, in the social hall of Karmolinski's church. He delayed his arrival by parking on a side street, just to spend time with Mustang.

"It seems all I've done the past few days is thank you," he stammered. "Connie's not the only one who believes a miracle occurred this afternoon..."

"Since I'm going cold turkey with my power come tomorrow, I wanted to go out with a bang."

"Even Rick's dad was awed."

"That should make the evening easier for everyone. In the morning, we head back to Montana..."

"Not right away. Mom, Dad and the rest are gathering for a champagne brunch at 11:00. Then, we'll caravan back to Des Moines..."

"Do we have to?"

"With us, it's tradition."

“I’m all for tradition, but too much of a good thing...” She laid her hand on his arm and winked.

He caught the inflection in her voice. “We could drive west on our own through Missouri and Nebraska, then bear north...”

“That way, we see more of the country.”

“Sounds like a plan to me.”

They joined the festivities at the church as the bride and groom were making their grand entrance. The caterer provided a traditional Polish dinner, with fried chicken, sausage, buttered noodles, mashed potatoes and gravy, green beans, sweet and sour cabbage, and a smorgasbord of pies for dessert. Many belts were unfastened as the meal progressed, the food delicious.

Mustang enjoyed watching the crowd eat. She even let Jim draw her onto the dance floor for a polka and, later, a waltz. As the single females gathered for the bouquet throw, she didn’t leave her seat, until Jim nudged her. The flowers were aimed straight at her, so she had no choice except to catch them.

Jim caught the garter ten minutes later; the couple danced together again.

After the three-tiered cake was cut and distributed, they slipped out the side door.

The midnight air cooled them, blowing in the pickup windows on the drive to the hotel. With the dawn, they threw their belongings behind the bucket seats and struck out on country roads, to see where destiny would lead them.