

# **The Mustang Chronicles:**

*Fugitive Mustang*

**A Novella**

by

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# I

Ben Espinoza was the last person Mustang expected to appear in the courtroom that sultry July afternoon. Finished with her testimony against the animal rights activists who'd stolen her father's horses, she sat among the other victims who'd recounted their anguish over losing valuable stock, albeit temporarily. Glancing up, she noticed the Hispanic FBI instructor slip into the last row of pews.

Damn their surveillance order! she cursed silently.

She'd known for a month investigators were following her again, thanks to sporadic manifestations of her power. Espinoza had been instrumental in that decision, she guessed. He continued to resent her dunking him in Loch Ness, and not surrendering Jack Parsons' journals.

What does he want with me now? she mused Does he think I won't recognize him, not having seen him in more than a year?

Questions piling over one another inside her head, Mustang had no one to use as a sounding board at the moment. Jim Neville, a Montana State Police detective, sat on the witness stand, verifying the prosecutor's assertion the seven members of the Equine Emancipation Project were guilty of felonies from Texas northward, committed over an eight month period.

Nor could the teenager inconspicuously leave the rustic, wood-paneled chamber in the Helena courthouse. Her flaming red hair prevented any secretive movement.

Unless...

Seconds away from speaking the words, she thought twice. She'd promised Jim not to use her power, and she'd kept that promise - made during their adventure in Hannibal, Missouri. How easily she could have transformed herself into a stooped, eighty year old woman and slipped past the federal agent; instead, she remained in her seat, perspiration beading at her temples.

The jury of twelve citizens would return their verdict in due time. Deputies armed with rifles and pistols ensured no violence or escape attempts would mar that moment. Mustang didn't usually watch television, but this reminded her of a Perry Mason re-run.

When the judge banged his gavel, breaking for lunch, Mustang hoped she could hide among the other spectators and avoid Espinoza. No luck with that strategy, Jim shouting as he squeezed through the crowd, "Mustang, wait up!"

Lawyers and reporters dispersed in the lobby, cameramen taping general shots for the evening news.

“Elizabeth Duryea!” cried a female voice.

Mustang spun, curious, and flash bulbs popped in rapid succession. When her eyes recovered, a middle-aged journalist wearing a *Helena Chronicle* press pass on a lanyard confronted her.

“What do you think about the trial so far?” the woman asked.

“No comment.”

“Were you nervous on the witness stand? You looked like you might break down in tears...”

What Mustang was thinking, she didn’t dare speak aloud - it had something to do with the reporter breaking into little pieces. “No comment.”

Jim intervened then, drawing the girl gently away from the media crush.

The woman called, “Surely you want to see these men convicted?”

Agitated, Mustang whirled on her. “Last time your ludicrous paper *quoted* me, my life, and my parents’ home was threatened. Get lost!”

“Breathe, sweetheart, breathe,” whispered Jim from behind, in her ear.

She stormed from the building. Hitting a wall of humid air, she slumped against the wrought iron railing bordering the stone stairs.

“Why does this always happen?” she lamented.

“Whether you like it or not, you’re news.” Jim slid his arm around her waist for support, and they descended to street level. “I’ve a feeling you always will be.”

Mustang paused, “You saw him, too?”

“Saw who?”

“Ben Espinoza.”

“No, I...”

“He came in while you were testifying.”

“Did he see you?” Jim inquired.

She twirled a curl around her finger for emphasis. “How could he miss me?”

“Point taken.” Brown eyes scanned the grounds. “Let’s get something to eat, and then I’ll take you home.”

“Like hell you will.”

“Now listen, young lady...”

“And don’t pull that ‘young lady’ garbage with me. Just because I love you, you’re not the boss of me.”

He laughed and, glimpsing his smile, she giggled. They crossed the pavement to a homey restaurant, finding a table far from the door, but with a good view of those who entered.

Espinoza had beaten them inside, however. The man in the adjacent booth lowered his newspaper, and it was none other than the FBI official.

"I'm not here to disturb you, Miss Duryea," he greeted. "I've been charged with delivering a set of papers..."

"What, a subpoena?" snapped Jim.

"As an officer of the law, Mr. Neville, you should know not to interfere with an agent executing his duties," Espinoza warned. "In fact, what I have for you we found when... cleaning out a certain property where we once met."

"Boleskine?" Mustang gasped.

He nodded.

"I get it," Jim stated. "Your crew went in and eradicated all signs Jack Parsons ever lived in the house..."

"Who divulged that name to you? The situation is on a need-to-know basis..."

"I told him what happened," admitted Mustang.

"And how many others?" Espinoza demanded. He extracted a notepad and pen from his suit coat pocket. "I want their names, immediately."

"Hell, my parents don't even know. And the others... are dead, mostly."

"That's fortunate for you. We might've had to take you into custody at once..."

"Take her into custody?" objected Jim.

"It's a definite possibility. Like Parsons, she poses a potential danger to national security."

"Oh, hell..." Mustang buried her head in her hands.

The waitress appeared, and the conversation ceased. Jim ordered club sandwiches and sodas for both; Espinoza briefly resumed rifling his newspaper.

"I didn't come here to upset or threaten you," the FBI agent continued. "I know you've been under a great deal of stress recently. I thought having your grandfather's will might distract you..."

"Parsons' will?" she echoed.

"Stuffed in the bottom of his sock drawer. It's nonsensical, at best, but he does mention you."

"When was it written?"

"It's dated October 3, 1964."

Jim grew more and more aggravated. “How can a will dated over forty years ago refer to someone who wasn’t even born yet?”

Mustang laid a surprisingly calm hand atop his fist. “It makes perfect sense to me, given what I know of him. He knew I’d be born, and that our paths would cross.”

A thick, yellowed envelope was passed between the tables and, while the teen studied the faded lettering, Espinoza departed.

“Good riddance,” Jim hissed. Then, Mustang’s puzzled squint and uncharacteristic frown caught his attention. “What’s wrong?”

She pushed the envelope toward him. “You’ve read parts of Parsons’ journals. Would you say that’s his handwriting?”

“From a detective’s point of view, I’d have to have the documents side by side to accurately compare them. This type of script was used by many in the scientific field, before computers transformed the creation of blue prints and technical data. I’ve heard of block lettering being forged and, yet, it must be taken into consideration that a person’s style of writing changes with age. Parsons wrote his journals in the ‘40s and ‘50s, and this is dated much later...”

“It’s not his writing, I’m sure of it,” Mustang insisted. “For one, the FBI must’ve cleared out Boleskine two years ago. Why wait so long to deliver this, unless they were tampering with it? Two, even before his death was staged in 1952, he owned very little of consequence due to financial problems. Why write a will at all, when you have nothing to bequeath to your heirs?”

“Some people are sentimental and wish to leave their wisdom behind, a mark of their existence.”

“JPL is a tribute to Parsons’ genius.” She thumped the packet on the table. “This... this is all wrong. It’s a set-up. The FBI is trying to maneuver me into doing... what? They want to get me off somewhere, unprotected, and... and...”

Watching her hazel orbs lit with a strange fire, Jim shuddered. “You’re getting paranoid for no reason. The Feds don’t work that way.”

“Don’t they? Look at you.”

“What about me?”

“Before I figured out what you were up to, you followed me everywhere, hiding around corners and parking behind trees...”

“But, I didn’t try to manipulate your activities.”

“What about bribing Nick the Geek to ask me to the prom?”

Platters of delicious looking sandwiches and potato chips were set before the couple, causing a lull in the discussion. Mustang jerked the toothpick holding together one section of toast, bacon, turkey and lettuce, and flicked it at Jim.

“How did you find out about that?” he muttered, raising a quarter of the sandwich to his lips.

“There was a letter waiting for me when we got back from Hannibal. Nick’s leaving for Harvard in a few weeks, and wants to take me out once before he goes, to ‘make up for exercising such bad manners’ accepting your money and making a fool of me.”

Jim sighed. “It was the only way I could think to keep you safe. We did a background check on Nick, and his clean record meant we wouldn’t have to worry about you running off on some after-prom road trip, where anything could happen.”

“You really think me so foolish?”

“I didn’t know you then, like I do now.” He sipped his soda. “Anyway, can we drop the subject? It worked out for the best. We got the horses back to their owners, and...”

“Still, it’s proof law enforcement agencies will do anything necessary to get what they want.” Her fingers drummed the envelope. “That’s why I’m sure this will is phony.”

“At least, open it and read it, before you decide.”

“Later. If we don’t go now, we’ll never get good seats in the courtroom.”

“You’re not going back in there. I’m taking you home.”

“What?”

“I’ve been informed the team of defense lawyers plans to use some... inflammatory evidence in rebutting the state’s case this afternoon. Last thing we need is for you to say the wrong thing...”

“I’ve controlled myself quite well the past few weeks, haven’t I?” Mustang spat.

“Yes, you have. You also haven’t been exposed to anything besides minor annoyances. Driving home through Nebraska was good for you. You learned to deal with life without your power, and I think you like living that way.”

“That’s what all ordinary people believe. To be honest, I feel like Samantha in an old episode of *Bewitched*, with Darrin nagging her not to use her witchcraft so she can fit his twisted concept of being a ‘normal’ mortal.”

“Well, excuse me.” Jim huffed. “I never meant to prevent you from expressing your personal uniqueness.”

“Fine. If I choose to rain down hail and lightning on the town square, I will. Should I determine the EEP defense team needs to drop dead in the middle of their closing statement, that’s a distinct possibility, too.”

He stopped with a chip hovering between his jaws at this last. From what he'd seen of Mustang's power, he knew she spoke truthfully. Whether dropping the engine from a car, making a horse talk, bringing a statue to life, or causing daisy petals to fall instead of rain, he'd grown accustomed to expecting the unexpected from this diminutive beauty.

"All right, we'll go back. And, when I take you to dinner tonight, we'll read the will together, okay?"

She smirked playfully. She didn't need any extraordinary magick to control Jim; what he did stemmed from his affection for her. Her feelings matched his, and not simply because the stray lock of black hair bouncing on his forehead made him appear boyish. Inside the lean physique, beyond the shoulder holster and sidearm, beat a generous, sensitive heart. One of a handful - still living - she'd told about her power, he hadn't rejected her out-of-hand.

She still feared eventually having to tell her parents.

The prosecution rested their case after Jim's testimony concluded; the EEP attorneys failed in their attempt to discredit the ranchers - accusing them of faking the horse thefts to collect on insurance policies - and attacking Mustang's integrity, entering her school records into evidence.

"Until her senior year, she rarely attended classes for more than a day or two at a time," droned a cocky professional in a brown three-piece Armani suit. "Truant officers have countless reports of her failure to comply with the simplest school rules. Her own parents can't explain her frequent disappearances, sometimes lasting weeks. The story she told about seeing seven men steal her father's stock sounded more like the dream of an unhinged manic-depressive, especially when coupled with the fact her own horse knocked her unconscious within moments of the supposed sighting."

Jim's biceps bulged as he physically restrained Mustang from leaving the pew to confront the man. The rest of the spectators didn't seem phased by the monologue; the girl had a reputation for being rebellious and disrespectful, dating back to her childhood.

The detective's problem: he didn't have a free hand to cover her mouth.

"Speak the truth, you shyster," she rumbled. "The naked truth."

The lawyer prattled on, "The whole ordeal is a figment of Miss Duryea's imagination and, as the only alleged witness, must be discounted entirely..." His tone changed as the seams of his coat and trousers separated, "Nonetheless, my clients have confessed in private their participation in these crimes, leaving the jury to bring back only one verdict: guilty on all counts."

Every stitch of expensive material fell from his wiry frame. Most of the women covered their eyes, the men gaped and laughed. Only the seven defendants had heard his final words, and their outrage manifested in an attack on their counsel.

Pinned on the floor, his torso and face bloodied, the attorney didn't hear the gunfire. Screams and panic ensued, with the main exit from the courtroom blocked by three men in ski masks, black jumpsuits with EEP patches and combat boots. They let loose a second barrage from their Uzis into the ceiling plaster.

Jim released Mustang and reached for his weapon. Somehow, the guards had been overpowered, and he believed himself the only armed officer in the room. Mustang laid a hand on his sleeve, stopping his motion.

"How many do you want to die?" she queried.

"Everybody down, and you won't get hurt!" hollered one of the trio, before Jim could reply.

The crowd, the judge and court personnel, and the prosecutor cowered close to the marble floor. Their frustrations against the lawyer satisfied, the seven defendants rose and greeted their comrades.

Mustang stepped into the aisle.

"On the ground, bitch!" growled one of the seven, reaching to throw her down.

He met with a nasty shock - an electrical shock.

His comrades saw the sparks fly. "What the..."

"You think you're big men, don't you?" she chuckled. "I've dealt with worse than you, by far. In the end, all bullies are small on their knees."

Reminiscent of a scene in a World War II French café, the three armed men and their seven confederates slammed on the stone. The impact jarred loose the weapons, which slid beneath the pews. Helpless, they gazed up at her.

"You can't love horses and hate human beings," she proclaimed. "You can't free one and kill the other. We all breathe the same air, though some deserve to more than others."

Ten pairs of hands clawed at constricted throats. Two thugs collapsed and three were already blue before Jim crawled over frightened matrons and reached Mustang.

"Stop it!"

"Why? They would've killed us..."

"Don't lower yourself to using their tactics. Let justice run its course."

"Justice is the figment of the government's imagination," Mustang bellowed. "The innocent are convicted while the guilty roam unchecked."

“I promise, these men will not go free, not after this.”

Jim waved in the SWAT team, hovering on the courtroom threshold. One by one, the men were unmasked, handcuffed, raised from their knees, and led to a waiting armored van. As Jim seized Mustang’s shoulder none too gently, guiding her through a side door, he saw the news camera partially shielded by the raised judge’s bench.

The whole incident had been caught on tape.

## II

The quiet bistro boasted good food and no televisions, so Mustang missed viewing the network footage and commentary. Jim did not scold her for using her power in the courtroom, fully cognizant that, had she not, dozens might’ve died. Rather, he convinced her to read Jack Parsons’ will in the veritable privacy of the empty dining room, waiting for their entrees.

The rambling document, much like his journals, was addressed, “To the Moonchild.” Mustang had been right about one thing: there was no list of property divided among heirs and loved ones. Parsons, essentially, had neither after his falsified death. Sort of a poem glorifying the power of nature, the last stanza weighed heavily on the girl’s mind more than previous passages.

When last I stood  
on holy ground,  
The wind didst blow  
and rain beat down.  
San Andreas shifted,  
flames consumed the trees.  
My secret is buried  
beneath the conjoined wreaths.

“You still doubt Parsons wrote this?” Jim asked, slicing his T-bone steak.

“No, this helps things fall into place. The FBI kept it confidential, knowing it’s a code. They wanted to break it, to find Parsons’ secret before anyone else. When they couldn’t, they decided to let me try. They’ll be monitoring everything I do - probably every phone call I make or website I visit - until I lead them to the answer.”

“Have you any ideas what Parsons meant?”

“It’s quite simple, really. He performed a ritual somewhere along the San Andreas fault, then buried his last precious possession beneath a symbol that looks like two wreaths.”

“Not much to go on. The San Andreas Fault is hundreds of miles long...” She smiled. “Sounds like we’ll be taking a road trip to California, doesn’t it?”

Staring down at his plate, Jim toyed with a cluster of broccoli.

“What?” Mustang prodded.

“I... can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve been reassigned.”

“Huh?”

“My district captain believes EEP can’t possibly threaten everyone who was in the courtroom today. Since you’re no longer the only witness, we’re no longer required to provide round-the-clock protection.”

“You know that’s not true,” protested Mustang. “If I hadn’t shorted out the circuit board in the news crew’s camera, I’d have religious fanatics and money-hungry promoters dogging my every step. As it is, I still have to worry about the FBI.”

“You... shorted...”

“No tape, no story,” she snickered.

He reached across the table and squeezed her hand. “That’s why I love you. You’re full of surprises.”

“So, road trip?”

“What you did doesn’t change the fact I’ve been reassigned. We can still see each other, just not every day.”

“Where will you be working?”

“Homicide, out of the Butte post.”

“Homicide? You’ll be bored stiff. Montana has maybe three a year.”

“They’ll find other things for me to do, I’m sure.”

They finished the meal in silence, refusing the waiter’s offer of dessert. The check paid, Jim escorted Mustang to his black Chevy police cruiser.

“You know,” she murmured, “I could solve Parsons’ mystery very quickly.”

“With your mind, I have every confidence it’ll take you only a day or two.”

“That’s not what I mean. All I have to do is express a desire to go where the secret is buried...”

“And a lightning bolt will... burn fresh holes in your palms?”

She nodded.

“Don’t, please,” he begged. “I don’t want to see you in pain...”

“Then, drive me.”

“That’s blackmail.”

“Call it what you will. Either way, I’m doing this.”

Jim held the passenger door open for her. “If we drive, the FBI will be on us every mile. They’ve probably got a GPS unit hidden on my pickup already.”

“That’s quickly remedied.”

“It could take weeks to find the site on the fault line.”

“Not if I do the research first. I’ll re-read Parsons’ journals, and see what clues I can find...”

Hesitantly, Jim agreed to the plan. He had a few ideas of his own, tapping into the FBI database to see how much of Jack Parsons’ files might have been uploaded...

Joe and Maggie Duryea didn’t see their daughter Wednesday. She sequestered herself in her bedroom, a secret compartment hanging open in her closet, a pile of worn books scattered on the mattress. She poured over every page, including formulae for solid jet fuels and sketches for modules attached to aircraft, tested on the Arroyo Seco near Pasadena. No one saw her grinning ear-to-ear at the tales of Parsons’ “Suicide Squad” - she was the man’s granddaughter, certainly. He took risks with life and limb, and spoke his mind without regret; she did the same.

His risks had garnered the interest of J. Edgar Hoover. To “protect” Parsons from sharing his knowledge with the Soviet KGB, FBI agents faked an explosion and whisked him away to Scotland - not that he’d ever been a spy, or intended to help the Cold War opposition. The Feds seldom acknowledge their mistakes, though, and only then under pressure during well-publicized Congressional committee hearings.

In Mustang’s case, had she never visited the man at Boleskine House, she might’ve escaped the FBI’s radar as his sole progeny. Tricked by Parsons himself, while she was blindfolded, into thrusting a dagger through his chest as part of an early morning ritual, she’d become an unwitting murderer. Discovering she had inherited his power - and using it while a group of FBI trainees watched - didn’t help her maintain a low profile.

Her possession of the very books she now perused added to the danger. In their first encounter, Ben Espinoza tried to prevent her from taking them, and took an involuntary swim in Loch Ness for his troubles. She grasped why the FBI

wanted them under lock and key. If they came hunting for them, she'd burn them first.

Just as easily, she could erase the computerized data which mandated all law enforcement agencies to track her movements if she entered their jurisdictions, but why spoil their fun? Agents could never take her into custody - as Espinoza hinted the day before - unless she was already dead.

Her reverie was interrupted by one reference to the San Andreas Fault in the 1952 journal. Parsons speculated on the power of the earthquakes generated, and the prospect of performing a ritual near the Salton Sea in southern California. "Must find the right place - to the north and slightly west, to best tap the powers of earth and water. The most propitious time shall be determined, before it's too late."

"Mom, do we have a map of California?" the girl yelled to the kitchen before breakfast Thursday.

"In the Suburban, I think."

Mustang didn't make it outside before the phone rang. Maggie handed her the receiver.

"Hello?"

Jim's stern bass crackled through the wire, with a background of shrill sirens.

"You on your cell?"

"I'm on the road. You need to get..."

The signal was lost.

An instant sense of fear consumed her. She dropped the phone on the kitchen counter and rushed through the back door. Crawling into the two-toned Suburban, she dug the atlas from under the driver's seat. She flipped pages frantically, and ran a trembling finger down the rendering of southern California. Fortunately, the Salton Sea was large enough to be obvious. North and slightly west of that body of water, a town named "Mecca".

Holy ground!

Back in her bedroom, Mustang gathered the journals and shoved them in the hole she'd cut in her closet wall. Sealing the drywall in place, she heard the phone ring again.

"Hon, it's for you!" announced Maggie. The woman's face reflected her concern when the frazzled teen snatched the receiver. "Everything okay?"

"I don't know," was the honest response. "Hello?"

"Have you found anything?" Jim gushed, above the sirens.

"I think so."

“Then, go.”

“Why?”

“Some electronics geek recovered the scrambled tape from yesterday. Not clear enough for the news broadcasts, but sufficient for the FBI to see you in action.”

“Oh, hell...”

“I estimate you’ve got five minutes...”

“I want you to come with me!” Mustang pleaded.

“No time. Do what you must and remember: I love you.”

The connection went dead.

Maggie hadn’t taken her eyes off her daughter, and sedately replaced the instrument in its cradle. “You’re leaving?”

“I probably won’t be coming back, either. I’d only put you and Dad in danger.”

“What about clothes, money?”

“I can manage.”

Her mother laughed bitingly. “That’s was young people always say, thinking they’re invincible.” She turned and pulled a pale green Ball jar from the cupboard above the stove. Wads of bills and coins were crammed inside. She pressed it into Mustang’s hands. “There’s about a thousand dollars there. Should help you make a fresh start.”

“Thanks, Mom. I love you.” She hugged the older woman and bolted outside.

The hill behind the ranch-style house still bore an indentation from the first time lightning had struck there, almost two years ago. Unscrewing the jar’s metal lid, Mustang crammed \$20s and \$10s in her jean pockets. At least, this time, she’d have money when she left home. The times she’d traveled to Italy and Japan, she hadn’t a cent to her name.

A caravan of unmarked white, blue and brown cars converged from the road, driving not on the gravel approach, but on the grass and through bushes. Ben Espinoza was the first to leap from the rear of a federally plated vehicle, shouting, “Surround the house!”

“Too late!” screamed Mustang from the rise.

Agents with pistols drawn, or toting high-powered rifles, assembled behind Espinoza.

“You getting a promotion if you take me in?” she challenged. “No more being an instructor at the academy?”

Issuing orders in a whisper, he started toward the hill slowly. “You’re a loose cannon, Miss Duryea, like your grandfather. You do things without thinking. You don’t understand the potential for disaster...”

“Or my use to the government as a secret weapon?” cried Mustang. “Who are you afraid will try to buy my services? With Parsons, it was the Soviets. You think Iran, or China, might offer a few million?”

Espinoza came within 100 feet of her. “There’s no escape.”

“Don’t you guys ever learn? If you recall, the first time we met...”

He evidently did, and retreated a few paces. The men near the cars raised their weapons. At the kitchen door, Maggie observed the scene in horror. Joe had emerged from grooming horses in the barn.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” he barked.

One agent whirled abruptly toward the voice and fired.

“Fire consume the bullet!” commanded Mustang,

The lead pellet erupted in flames before reaching her father. Two dozen Feds shivered in their highly-polished shoes.

“Miss Duryea, let’s do this peacefully,” Espinoza urged.

“Fine. I’ll peacefully leave, and you’ll peacefully return to the hole you crawled from.”

“You know I can’t allow that.”

“How do you intend to stop me?”

He sneered, “If not this minute, then soon enough.”

“You’ll have to find me, first.”

She turned her back to him and mumbled so he couldn’t hear, “I go to Mecca, California near the Salton Sea.”

Maggie shrieked and fainted when the lightning bolt crackled to earth. The FBI agents rushed the hill once the glow dissipated. They found only a circle of scorched grass.

### III

Mustang’s sole aspiration on numerous occasions to blend in, achieving the goal would be impossible in southern California. The lightning bolt manifested her just beyond the town border, near a sign on the two-lane highway reading, “Welcome to Mecca.” Fully conscious - perhaps because she’d been prepared for the journey, unlike previous episodes - she realized Ben Espinoza would’ve fit in far better than she in the predominantly Hispanic settlement.

Reason concluded the population may have shifted in the fifty-plus years since Jack Parsons visited the area, performed his ritual and buried his secret. And, again, he may have merely passed along the main street of what he coded in his will as “holy ground”, en route to his chosen destination near the San Andreas Fault.

She strolled past a fairly modern building, designated community center and medical clinic, ruminating how she could notify Jim Neville of her safety. Signals to his cell phone would be tracked, and his home phone was probably tapped, due to his known association with her.

For a moment, she giggled - ironic to have a member of one government agency under investigation by another.

Sending an e-mail was out; their origin could be traced via the servers used - she'd learned that from Nick the Geek. The same with a text message, except...

If matter could become energy, then energy could become tiny pixels on a screen...

She dared not reveal her location for, if Jim pursued her, the FBI would be close behind him. Five minutes' concentration transmitted the message, “Luv U,” so he'd know she was unharmed.

Except for her hands.

Third degree burns blackened the skin on her palms, though she could tolerate the pain a bit better. As she inspected the injuries, two young men whistled at her. “Hey, Chica! Que pasa?”

She decided *not* to ask them for directions, entering a convenience store.

How could they direct her, anyway? There would be no marker at the site she sought, designating it a historic monument. Her best hope was to head for the fault line and search the stretch nearest the town.

First, she purchased a cheap straw hat and bottle of water. Her skull protected from the vicious rays of the sun, she struck out alone.

She had company, though, uninvited. The pair from the store dogged her steps, and they were joined by some friends. Full daylight to her benefit, she didn't suspect they wanted to rob her; maybe they were just killing time. No need to forcibly dissuade their attentions... yet.

Gazing past the houses and buildings, Mustang comprehended why Parsons had entrusted his secret to the locale. The natural elements were at their most pure in this part of Riverside County - she felt it. All around, mountains bordered farmland where date palms and other crops grew in fertile soil. Heat over 100 degrees, coupled with humidity, could condense into clouds and drop

torrential rains at a moment's notice. Gentle breezes would oblige by suddenly buffeting the residents with driving winds.

"Where you goin', Chica? You too good to talk to us?"

A hand on her arm confirmed the youths were closer than safety permitted.

"I wouldn't do that," she warned.

"Why not?" Dark and gangly, the leader, sporting a bandanna and tattoos, circled in front of her. "You're the outsider here. What you want in our town?"

"To be left alone."

She spit on his fingers, and he released his grip.

"What the hell?" he cursed. His flesh appeared to have been burned off by acid.

One of his comrades clutched her shoulders, and instantly recoiled. Blood gushed from multiple cuts, as if he'd grabbed razor wire.

"This bitch, she loco!" moaned the leader. "Let's get out of here."

With a wry grin, Mustang continued along the street. She turned east on Box Canyon Road, unrushed, taking in every ounce of scenery, for she hadn't the faintest notion where the "conjoined wreaths" would appear.

Her concentration faltered as thoughts swirled inside her head. For so many years, she had relished solitude; Jim Neville's presence in her life had changed all that. Here she was, though, cars speeding past, feeling more isolated than ever. She envisioned him, sitting at his desk in the Butte state police post...

Zooming in on southern California radar via the internet. He wasn't tracking rain storms through the region, just a rogue bolt of lightning. Jim knew, from his personal investigation of Mustang's power, every time nature reacted to her command, the weather service recorded the disturbance.

He ran the cursor along the San Andreas Fault while the feed looped the past six hours. The blip wasn't even visible for a thousandth of a second; he paused and waited for the images to repeat.

"Yes!" he hissed, his comrades in the office not bothering to look up. They were used to making discoveries in odd moments, and assumed Jim was researching a case.

Grabbing his suit jacket, he rose and headed toward the door. "I'm going for coffee," he told the uniformed sergeant at the front desk.

Coffee wasn't his goal, really. With his naturally suspicious mind, he guessed the FBI was monitoring calls not only from his personal phones, but the official switchboard, as well. Best not to be careless...

Inside the quaint diner a half-block north, he ordered a mocha latte, then crossed to a pay phone on the wall. Quick fingers punched a series of long-distance access codes, then a phone number.

“Hello?” came a female voice through the line.

“Jean?”

“Jim, is that you?”

“Uh-huh. Look, do me a favor and call Glenn at his office. Give him this message: Scramble Plan B, noon today. Got it?”

“I’ve got it. I don’t understand it, but I’ve got it.”

“Better you don’t understand, just be sure and tell him. It’s urgent.”

“Okay.”

“Thanks, Sis.”

Cup in hand, Jim returned to the office. The coffee turned cold after an hour, untouched.

“How ‘bout lunch?” The wall clock read 11:30, and Jim glanced up to find his district captain, Steve Overmyer, standing beside his chair.

“Sure.”

Not according to plan, yet the situation could be turned to his advantage. There was a cozy restaurant near the Butte Municipal Airport where many state police officers ate before coming on duty, or after their shift ended. Overmyer accepted the suggestion without question.

He also agreed to drive, leaving Jim’s police cruiser in the parking lot.

“We’ve got a bit of a problem,” Overmyer began, even before the waitress could take their order.

“What kind of a problem?”

“FBI.”

“Have they been pestering you about...”

“You? Not specifically. More about Elizabeth Duryea, and why we are no longer monitoring her whereabouts.”

“What did you tell them?”

“I told them our resources were better used protecting informants in more pressing cases, now the prosecutor has his pick of witnesses to call against the EEP crew when the new trial starts.”

Jim smirked. “I don’t suppose they liked that answer.”

“You’re right. It seems they have an interest in Miss Duryea, entirely separate from the horse theft case.”

“I know.”

“You know?” Overmyer snapped.

“Because of her grandfather.”

“You mean, one of the messes from the Hoover era?”

“No, I think they created this mess entirely on their own. You don’t plan to cooperate?”

“My argument about our resources was legitimate. This year’s budget cuts mean we’re short-handed and can’t afford to have one man chase one person 24/7. With the ongoing inter-agency rivalry, however, and the friction caused when reports aren’t shared in a timely manner...”

“Steve, ignore their request.”

“You know I can’t just blow them off.”

“Give me three days before you let them know your decision, then.”

“And how will you spend that three days?” inquired the captain.

“Getting the FBI off Mustang’s back, once and for all.”

“Care to tell me how?”

“Not unless you want a grilling from their agents.”

Overmyer raised his hands in surrender. “Do what you’ve got to do. I’ll make sure your shifts are covered.”

“Thanks.” Jim excused himself from the table and moved toward the restrooms. Instead of turning into the well-marked door down a narrow corridor, he pushed open the fire exit and jogged the short distance to the airport.

Anyone who might’ve seen the lanky, dark gentleman pass through the terminal would not have given him a second thought. No one checked his ID as he made his way to the gate where a corporate-registered Lear jet waited.

He boarded unchallenged. The pilot turned in his seat. “You Neville?”

“Yes.”

“I filed a flight plan for Mitchell, South Dakota.”

“Great. Take off.”

Settling in a comfortable cabin seat, Jim hoped the craft would be far gone before the FBI deduced he wasn’t rejoining Steve for lunch.

He spoke with his brother-in-law Glenn during the flight via a secure wireless phone. “I don’t know how I’ll repay you.”

“If what you told me at the wedding rehearsal dinner is true, you can repay me by keeping Mustang safe,” said the scientist. “Where to, after Mitchell?”

“That’s a ruse to throw off the Feds. Palm Springs should get me close...”

“Will you be needing a car?”

“Reserved on the corporate account - no names.”

“Will do.”

“You won’t get in trouble?”

“I’m an owner. I’m not going to reprimand myself.”

Jim chuckled. “Thanks.”

The jet stopped on the single airstrip in eastern South Dakota just long enough to refuel. Then, it soared in the opposite direction toward the Pacific Ocean.

An ocean breeze would’ve relieved Mustang’s profuse sweating as she hiked along the road. She’d emptied the water bottle, and was sorely tempted to make a spring bubble forth from the gravel. Seeking respite in the shade of a lone maple tree, she fanned herself with the straw hat and waited until the damp patches on her t-shirt dried.

Already, she’d brushed off every dirt-encrusted gravestone in a tiny churchyard, not finding the double ring symbol. She’d scoured old wooden fence posts, thinking Parsons might have carved the marker himself decades earlier.

Recollecting how her grandfather had set up an altar in a secluded part of the Boleskine estate, she presumed he might have done likewise along the fault, if the ritual had been important enough for him to travel so far from his Pasadena home. It could be as simple as a flat-topped stone...

It could have been constructed on one of many mountains overlooking the San Andreas Fault, as well. The poetry of Parsons’ will had been sufficiently vague to reference any point within five miles of Mecca and the earthquake line.

He hadn’t wanted the FBI to find it, though, and he knew they would seek it.

She resumed her trek. By dusk, she had searched both sides of the San Andreas a mile in each direction, and continued to the foothills beyond. She delighted in finding a narrow waterfall which formed a fast-flowing creek. Sating her incredible thirst, she tried to ignore her growling stomach.

The nearest hotel nowhere in sight, Mustang curled up among the trees and dozed fitfully. A dream of Parsons performing the Mecca ritual would have been welcome; she settled instead for the growls of unseen wild animals, too close for comfort.

“I wonder if Francis had this problem traveling around Assisi?” she wondered aloud.

A pair of cat-like eyes peering down from a high branch gave answer.

“I’m not your dinner, my friend, so be off.”

Was that a purring noise she heard?

Had nature itself sent a sentry to guard her while she slept?

She trusted such was the case, and allowed herself a few hours of rejuvenating rest. More hungry when the sun rose, she determined to break off

her search by mid-day, if no progress had been made. She would do no one any good if her strength failed from starvation.

Slow going, picking around the base of the mountain range. Mustang grasped why climbers wore specially-made boots and used safety equipment. By noon, the knees of her jeans were torn, the skin beneath bloodied. Her elbows, too, had sustained deep scratches. All for naught.

The long walk to Mecca depressed her. She kept her head bowed, the brim of her hat shielding her face from the scorching sun. Had she not been looking down, she never would have spotted the metal disk sparkling in the gravel. She stooped to examine it, thinking it a coin.

Neither thin nor spherical, the teen dug through the dirt and discovered what she'd initially seen was the head of a rusted railroad spike. No tracks ran near the town, from what she'd seen - how had this oddity come to be trampled into the ground?

Mustang scanned the surroundings tentatively - farm fields in abundance, and migrant workers harvesting crops all the way to where the mountains blocked further view of the horizon.

Except...

Far to the northeast, well away from the paved road, the sun glinted off another shiny object positioned higher on the mountain than she had previously searched, and too large to be an iron spike. If nature meant to get her attention, it had succeeded.

The girl forgot her hunger, choosing a round-about route to the site, not wishing to disturb the workers or damage vegetables in their neat rows. Two hours elapsed. Her legs throbbed during the ascent; finally, she slumped over a smooth, level slab balanced atop two boulders - Parsons' altar.

Half expecting a chorus of angels to break into song, Mustang contemplated the rough rock face overhead. Similar to the formation which some claimed resembled Abraham Lincoln's profile, or the one millennia had shaped like an elephant, the figure of two interlocking wreaths was an optical illusion, visible only at a specific angle.

Someone, sometime, had wedged a six-inch square mirror into a gap between the stones - the source of the beacon. Up close, Mustang watched how the reflected light traced an arc on the make-shift altar.

It also revealed where the Parsons' had hidden his most valuable secret.

A minuscule chip in the mirror deflected one shaft in a different direction. Mustang knelt beside the boulder supporting the right side of the slab and

scattered a mound of pebbles deliberately arranged to look like debris from an avalanche.

The carved ivory box she found was too small to hold a million dollars, unless an assortment of exquisite jewels were nestled inside. Any rings or pearls might bring a good price, too, if she had to sell them. Whatever lay within, they *were* family heirlooms, and not to be disposed of without serious thought.

Opening the box itself was a serious matter. Parsons had invoked the elements of air, fire, water and earth to protect his secret, not in mere English, Mustang knew, but the Hebrew and Enochian she'd once heard him chant. They had obliged him these many years. For that faithful service, she - Parsons' granddaughter - must offer appropriate thanks.

She stood erect, gazing upon the San Andreas Fault, Mecca and more mountains in the distance, and the farmland between. She placed the box on the altar, her hands atop it. Tears welled, unbidden, in her eyes.

"For everything, my gratitude. For giving me a grandfather, and letting me get to know him; for keeping his secret intact, my heartfelt appreciation. For all the craziness of the past two years, my thanks."

Imitating Parsons during the rituals she witnessed at Boleskine, she bowed to the four points of the compass.

So much for formalities.

## IV

Stubby fingernails tried to free the cover of the carved ivory box, unsuccessfully. Mustang felt a narrow line of putty, used to prevent water from seeping in, no doubt. Finding a sharp rock sliver, she chipped away at the hardened material.

The contents neither disappointed nor thrilled the girl: a well-aged sheet of typing paper. Gingerly unfolding the thick bond, what must've once been rich black ink now shone dull. The script was Parsons', to be sure, that block lettering familiar from his journals. No letter, though, nor an addenda to his will. Mustang recognized a scientific formula.

Having rushed through high school chemistry to satisfy the principal, and avoided memorizing physics notes, she could only guess at its significance.

She slipped the paper in the front pocket of her jeans, restoring the box to its hiding place. If the FBI did manage to decipher the will and search the site, they'd never know she'd been there and completed her quest.

With a much lighter heart - and a totally rebellious stomach - she tramped toward Mecca. Once she rehydrated herself and ate, she would decide the next step.

Riding a lightning bolt back to Montana was not an option.

Otherwise, the globe offered a myriad of opportunities.

Cars sped by on Box Canyon Road, a normal Friday in southern California. The silver Toyota Corolla made no impression on her as it rolled east. The screeching brakes, however, roused her from ruminations on the allure of Australia, India and Brazil. When she looked over her shoulder, the compact was racing toward her.

“Oh, hell...”

She could run, but she was too weak to maintain full speed for more than two hundred yards or so. She could drop the car’s engine off its mounts - not a new feat in her repertoire. Induce a heart attack in the driver? she debated.

No, he might veer off through the fields and hurt others.

If it proved to be Ben Espinoza, she could bury him neck-deep in an ant hill...

But, it wasn’t.

A cloud of dirt floated past when the vehicle skidded to a stop, then Jim Neville swept her into an emotional embrace.

“I thought I’d never find you!” he exclaimed.

Between kisses, she sputtered, “What are you doing here?”

“Did you honestly think I’d let you go off by yourself, with the FBI threatening their worst?”

She wriggled from his grasp. “What do you mean, ‘their worst’?”

“I checked the database just before I phoned you yesterday. Espinoza’s last entry authorized use of maximum force.”

“Meaning...”

“Put simply: shoot first, ask questions later.” He looked around nervously, and hustled Mustang to the car. “Come on.”

“Come on, where?”

“Somewhere the Feds won’t be hunting for you.”

Jim turned south on Route 88, barreling along the western shore of the Salton Sea. Mustang assumed they were headed to the Mexican border, when a change of direction took them into San Diego, moon rising in the clear night sky.

The massive bridge spanning the bay, where dozens of Navy ships were moored, frightened Mustang, until she saw a singular roof rising above the posh community of Coronado.

“What?” Jim asked.

“That’s... where they filmed *Some Like It Hot*...”

“What? Where?”

She pointed over rows of houses at the Hotel del Coronado.

Jim admitted, “Hmm. I never knew that.”

“Why are we going there?”

“I had Glenn reserve a room.”

“In his name?”

“How stupid do you think I am?” he raged tensely. “I’ve investigated enough criminals in the past ten years; I know how to cover my tracks and protect my... accomplices.”

She hugged his arm contritely. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry I blew up,” he said, patting her hand.

Mustang was like a child on Christmas morning, walking through the famed lobby of the luxurious structure. She barely heard Jim tell the desk clerk, “The reservation is for the Livermore Research Group.”

The cheery blonde pulled up a screen on the computer. “Of course, Mr. Henson.” She handed him a key card. “I can have the bell hop unload your luggage...”

“No need. We’ll bring it up later.”

Moving toward the elevator - where Jack Lemmon, in drag, slapped Joe E. Brown during the classic film - Mustang muttered, “Mr. Henson?”

“Glenn used to call me ‘Jim Henson’, after the creator of the Muppets.”

“Why?”

“In college, I earned spending money doing puppet shows at kids’ birthday parties.”

They laughed together as they stepped onto the third floor.

The door unlocked, Mustang rushed past the bed to the window. Lights of the city twinkled on the Pacific’s angry waves. Jim joined her, slipping his arm around her waist. “For tonight, no worries.”

She spun toward him. “And, tomorrow?”

“We keep moving.”

“How long?”

“Until the heat dies down.”

Mustang reached for her pocket, and cringed at her tattered jeans and filthy shirt. A jumble of \$20s and \$10s fell on the desk. “First thing after breakfast, I buy some new clothes.” She tossed Parsons’ formula at Jim. “While I’m in the shower, see what you think of this.”

The water washed away a layer of grime and the tightness in her muscles. Having clean hair after two days roaming the countryside added to her contentment. She emerged from the bathroom wrapped in a thick terry robe.

Jim stared at her solemnly, the paper unfolded on his lap.

“What?” she prodded.

“This isn’t a recipe for chocolate cake.”

“That much, I do know.”

“Do you know what it is?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea.”

“The second item of business in the morning, after you satisfy your womanly compulsion to shop ‘til you drop: we’ll see what the professionals think.”

She sensed his offbeat sense of humor in the shopping remark, but, “What professionals?”

“Researchers at USC, maybe? Or UCLA.”

“Why the big schools? Won’t the scientists be obligated to turn us in?”

“I’d be more concerned about them stealing the formula for themselves...”

“Then, forget it. It’s enough the FBI thinks it’s critical to national security...”

Jim apologized. “Sorry. Just a detective’s curiosity.”

She crawled beside him on the king-sized mattress. “Are you a detective 24/7?”

“Right now, I’m a very tired detective.”

“Having put a lot of mileage on my feet the last couple days, I’m exhausted, too.”

They fell asleep in each other’s arms.

If the night hadn’t been the consummation of their love Mustang hoped for, Saturday was even more disappointing. Attired in a San Diego t-shirt and relaxed-fit Levis, she rode in the Corolla’s passenger seat as Jim drove aimlessly from small town to small town.

They ordered dinner at a drive-in burger stand near Coachella around 7:00. “Still no ideas?” inquired Mustang, munching a handful of greasy fries as green fields rolled past .

“Only one, and it’s my last resort.”

“Burning the formula?”

“God, no. What if it’s for a medicine which will cure cancer?”

“Parsons worked in rocket fuel, so I don’t think...”

“What if it’s a design for machinery which will generate renewable energy, to stop global warming?”

“They didn’t worry about such things in the ‘50s. This was a man who went out to the Arroyo Seco and nearly blew himself and his friends into little pieces. Who knows what toxic chemicals they released in the atmosphere...”

“Then, I’m stumped.”

“What about someone in the Butte forensics lab? Are any of those guys up on the latest science...”

“No, but...”

Jim steered the car into a vacant playground. He flipped open his cell phone. Mustang blocked his access to the keypad with her hand.

“What’s wrong?” he queried.

“If the FBI is monitoring your signal, they’ll find us...”

“Knowing their methods, they’ve already shown your graduation photo to everyone in Riverside County.” He jerked the phone from her reach, selecting a number from the programmed memory. She heard the buzz-like ringing tone before he raised the device to his ear.

“Jean? I know it’s your evening out without the kids. I need Glenn. Now.” During the pause, Jim looked at Mustang. “Give me the paper.”

She passed him the yellowed sheet.

“Glenn? You think you can decipher a scientific formula for me?”

Mustang slid closer, and Jim held the phone away from his ear, so she could hear Glenn’s reply.

“What kind of formula?”

Jim quipped, “If I knew, would I be asking you, idiot?”

“Okay, read me what you’ve got.”

“The ink is really faded, so I may have to guess at some of it...”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“The first line reads, ‘If F equals G m1 m2 over r squared’ ...”

“Which are capitals, which lower case?”

“The F and G are capitals, the M’s and R lower case.”

“The numbers, are they subscript?”

“Uh-huh.”

Both heard Glenn’s sharp intake of breath.

“What is it?” Jim prompted.

“It’s not good, Jim. Can you scan the paper and fax it to me?”

Mustang interspersed, “Not a chance.”

“What about e-mail?”

“No computers out here,” supplied Jim.

“Yours a camera phone?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Take a well-lit shot of the sheet, then, and transmit it.”

“Okay...”

Jim lowered the window so the sun fell full on the paper, and adjusted the distance of the tiny lens until the handwriting came into focus. Tapping a few more keys, the image was duplicated nearly 500 miles to the north.

Seconds later, Glenn’s voice was tinged with fear. “Who wrote this?”

Jim deferred to Mustang. “Jack Parsons.”

“You mean, JPL’s Jack Parsons?” came the incredulous retort.

“The one and only.”

Glenn must’ve lowered the phone, for the couple heard a muffled, “Waiter, double whiskey!” Then, more clearly, “Where are you, Jim?”

“In a park thirty miles south of Palm Springs.”

“I can scramble the jet in ten minutes. I’ll authorize the pilot to cross into Mexico or Canada. You choose.”

“What *is* it?” Mustang moaned.

“It’s a working formula for zero gravity propulsion.”

This time, Jim grumbled, “Oh, hell...”

“Explains why the government crowd has been hot on your heels, eh?” remarked Glenn.

“You ain’t kidding, Brother.”

“I’ll let you go, so I can call the airport. I’ll instruct the pilot to wait one hour after landing at Palm Springs International and, if you don’t show, he’ll know something’s happened and return to Frisco.”

“Got it. Thanks, Glenn.”

The phone silent, Jim and Mustang stared at each other. “What next?” the girl finally ventured.

“First, I’d recommend folding this up in your wallet.”

“I don’t have one.”

“Then, we’ll buy one at the next gas station.”

“And, then?”

“It’s up to you, but I’d prefer Canada over Mexico.”

“I can’t let you come with me!” Mustang objected. “What about your job, your family?”

“I’m in this up to my neck, just like you. I’m sure once my district captain is updated by the Feds, he’ll type up my resignation, with a blank space for my

signature. As for the family, we can always move the reunions north of the border, instead of meeting in Des Moines. There's nothing to keep me in the States."

Jim cranked the steering wheel, performing a U-turn on the cobblestones. Not wanting to risk a speeding ticket, he set the cruise control at 57 mph, watching for approaching convenience stores.

His right hand clasped Mustang's left, both seeking and providing reassurance. "I love you, you know," he declared.

She lamented, "I wouldn't have caused you this trouble for all the world."

"I couldn't let you stand alone, even though you could decimate a battalion of FBI agents with a smile." The Corolla glided up to a gas pump near the I-10 interchange. Jim stepped out, stretching. "I'll fill the tank while you buy your wallet."

Mustang looked neither right nor left as she entered the chain store. A red canvas billfold would serve as a repository for the formula. After paying the cashier, she ripped off the price tag, arranged the assortment of \$10s and \$20s to camouflage the sheet and tucked it in her hip pocket.

She and Jim almost collided as she made her exit. "I'll be out in a minute," he informed her.

"I'm going to use the restroom."

"Make it quick."

Not quick enough, to her eternal misfortune. As she rounded the corner of the building on her way back to the car, she halted. No less than fifteen FBI vehicles blocked all egress from the property, and twenty agents had their pistols aimed at Jim, who stood frozen, holding a bottle of water.

"On the ground, hands over your head," barked Ben Espinoza.

Mustang was getting really tired of his interference in her life.

Instead of raising his arms, Jim lowered them. Mustang saw he was going to set the bottle on the concrete and put his wallet in his pants.

"Gun!" shouted what must have been a rookie on the team.

A hail of bullets riddled Jim's torso and, when the barrage ceased, he sank to his knees and pitched sideways in a puddle of blood.

A scream rent the air; Mustang realized only later the sound had come from her throat.

Espinoza spied her then. He waved to his men. "Get her!"

"You bastards!" the teen shrieked, fleeing around the rear of the structure at full speed.

When the FBI agents formed a perimeter, she was gone.  
A motorcycle roared down the road once the traffic light turned green...