

The Mustang Chronicles:

Reckless Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

All hell broke loose.

And the good thing - for Elizabeth “Mustang” Duryea, at least - no one could blame her.

She’d returned to Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High weeks into the current semester, at the unrelenting insistence of her parents. Since her unplanned journey to Scotland, the teen had feared roaming the institution’s hallowed halls, knowing the power over nature thrust upon her by rocket scientist Jack Parsons could cause irreparable damage if she let her anger have sway - though none would claim she’d maintained perfect attendance prior to that event.

The screams which resonated through the science wing in mid-afternoon weren’t the result of her torching annoying classmates, or shattering test tubes in chemistry class. She was nowhere near the source, for that matter. As a mob of students and teachers rushed in the direction of the noise, she nonetheless found herself hustled unwillingly along with the crowd.

Which halted abruptly eight feet from the biology lab door, terrified by red splatters painting the frame.

The principal fought his way through the crush, sirens already blaring outside the building. That elderly gentleman recoiled in horror, and Mustang found herself alone in the wake of a retreating stampede.

View unimpeded, her jaw gaped at the sight of teacher Wilfrid Bailey collapsed on a blood-soaked floor, some type of electronic implement clutched in his hand, and three mutilated, unmistakably dead bodies.

“Oh, hell...”

Instinct kicked in without Mustang considering the consequences. Bailey groaned and fought his way to his knees; the girl slip-slided across sticky tiles and squatted beside him.

“Are you okay?” she muttered.

“Somebody... hit me...”

No nurse, Mustang couldn’t tell if he was actually injured. Flashing lights beyond the classroom windows heralded the arrival of emergency crews - and, probably, police. Based on her treatment by Scottish authorities months earlier, she raised Bailey to his feet and dragged him from the room. She would protect him from false accusations until she could get his side of the story.

Both their shoes coated with muck, it wouldn’t take much to track the pair along the corridor. “Leave no marks,” the teen commanded, glimpsing how the footprints vanished behind them.

Solidly built, Bailey was heavier than he appeared, and leaned on Mustang's shoulder as they moved. She steered him into the boys' restroom and locked the door.

"Oh... my God!" he gasped, standing before the mirror.

Mustang instructed, "Wash up, quick. I figure you've got ten minutes, tops, to clear your name."

Bailey doused his head in a sink of running water. Dripping brown hair hung in his eyes when he straightened; he disregarded the longish mane, scrubbing red stains from his arms and hands with a bar of pungent soap - much the same way surgeons sterilized themselves prior to operating, from what Mustang had seen in various movies. She tossed him a length of paper towels from the dispenser, realizing no amount of laundry detergent or dry cleaning would salvage his sport coat, black trousers, shirt and tie.

"Why are you helping me?" he asked, still staring at his reflection.

"You said somebody hit you. Whatever happened, it might not be your fault."

"They attacked... from all sides. I had to defend myself."

"The kids attacked you?"

"They... weren't human. They were..."

Mustang scrutinized the middle-aged figure. His right cheek twitched erratically, and his fingers flexed and unflexed ceaselessly. "Are you... on drugs?"

"I'm a doctor, for Christ's sake. Why would I be that stupid?"

"I've heard plenty of doctors lose their licenses because they prescribe themselves painkillers and stuff."

"They're idiots. All I did was take two aspirin this morning because my bad knee was bothering me, then..." His voice faded.

"Then, what?"

"By the time I got to school, I felt really strange. Light-headed, nervous. I barely made it to the lab before they attacked."

"What did you use to defend yourself?"

"A cast saw."

"What's a cast saw?"

He splashed his face with more water. "It's used to cut plaster casts off broken limbs. I was an orthopedic surgeon."

That explained his hand-washing technique. "Why aren't you in an office somewhere treating patients?"

"I got tired of dealing with sprained ankles and hypochondriacs."

“So you’d rather deal with a room full of underachievers nine months a year?”

A commotion outside the door preempted his answer. The sound of boots and chatter diminished; Mustang breathed a sigh of relief.

Bailey whispered, regardless. “As a teacher, I’m not called to the hospital at all hours of the day and night to set broken bones or perform emergency surgery.”

The choice made sense to Mustang, framed in those terms. Still...

“Why would you keep a cast saw in your classroom?”

“It’s useful for cutting innumerable items.” He squinted deep-set brown eyes, accented by crow’s feet at the corners. “Who are you, by the way? You’re not in any of my classes.”

“Somebody who might be able to get you out of this mess, if you have a reasonable explanation.”

“A mite too full of yourself, aren’t you? What could a freshman like you do?”

“I’m a junior, sort of, and you’d be surprised what I can do, but time is running out, Dr. Bailey. Tell me the truth, or I unlock the door, now.”

“I don’t know what the truth is. After I was hit on the head - feeling as bad as I already did - I guess I hallucinated, or perhaps had a seizure...”

“And killed three people?”

“Did I? I only meant to hold them off until my cries for help were heard.”

“You yelled for help?” Mustang persisted.

“At the top of my lungs.”

Something wasn’t right, to be sure. If Bailey had been crying out, why didn’t the security guards or other teachers respond? Or, had he hallucinated hearing his own voice, as well as the monsters he claimed attacked him?

“What have you eaten today?”

“I had a couple cups of coffee and a doughnut in the teachers’ lounge before the first bell.”

“Any of the other teachers - or students - holding a grudge against you?”

“Why?”

“Who knows? You may have flunked one of the football players, and cost him a spot on the team. With adults, anything is possible.”

“Impossible, I drank from the same pot as five others. And I chose the doughnut at random from a box of two dozen.”

The search for the murder suspect had begun in earnest, Mustang detected through the peeling wooden door. “You swear to me you didn’t kill those kids on purpose?” she hissed.

“I swear.”

“Come on, then.”

“Where?”

“As far from here as we can get.”

The teen deftly threw open the double-pane window and hoisted herself over the sill.

“What are you doing?”

“It’s called escaping.”

“But, we’re on the second floor...”

“Trust me, I used to do this a lot when I got bored in class. It’s perfectly safe.”

For an agile youngster, maybe. Not necessarily for a man in his forties. Bailey followed Mustang’s lead, but caught his sleeve on an exposed nail, ripping the shirt and losing his balance on narrow footholds in the brick exterior facade. Fortunately, Mustang caught him by a belt loop and, uttering a quiet directive, lowered him to the snow-covered ground, uninjured.

“Strong for your size,” he remarked, as she tugged him toward the tennis complex.

“Shut up.”

Beyond a tall chain-link fence surrounding dormant clay courts, the partially-frozen Canyon Creek streamed beneath a pedestrian bridge and through a grove of trees. Shielded from prying eyes, Mustang leaned against a sturdy chestnut. Bailey paced nervously.

“When they don’t find me in the building, they’ll expand the search, won’t they?” he proposed.

“Sure, but have you ever counted how many storage closets, lockers and other places to hide there are? It’ll take an hour, minimum, before they come outside.”

“So we dawdle here until we’re arrested?”

“No, we dawdle here and think.”

“My car is in the teachers’ lot,” the man volunteered.

“Worst choice. They’d trace your plates in a flash, and set up road blocks across the state.” The girl lowered her head into her hands, auburn hair hiding her face. “What we need is a way to recreate the scene...”

“Impossible!”

Taking Parsons' advice to keep silent about her power, Mustang spoke through grit teeth. "Trust me, nothing's impossible."

"Unless you witnessed what happened, there's no way such a recreation would be accurate."

"*You* witnessed it. And, even if your brain didn't register the reality, your eyes did. They're very much like cameras, as you should know, so all we'd need is a..." She shivered as a chill breeze caught her, recalling how her cousin Rachel's nightmarish visions had been projected onto a television screen. No such electronic devices near at hand, the next best thing would be... "You have a cell phone?"

Bailey extracted a Blackberry from his trouser pocket. She rose and stood beside him, the minuscule screen shaded from the sun. "You want to make a call?"

"No. Your eyes will show us what you really saw in the classroom."

He almost dropped the device when images flickered in eerie silence. Approximately twenty students were scattered around the lab tables, working on an experiment. Mustang had never liked science, and didn't pay much attention, so she couldn't identify whether the group was dissecting frogs or examining dinosaur bones. Through Bailey's orbs, she watched him circulate, observing technique and results.

At the front of the room, he turned his back to jot a notation on the chalkboard. That's when someone did hit him from behind. He staggered and spun, grabbing the cast saw from a shelf beneath his desk. With no other provocation, he lashed out at the nearest students - who'd actually rushed to his aid after the assault. They were sliced and maimed in seconds, then Bailey slammed to the floor.

The whole ordeal had taken less than a minute.

"Sweet Jesus!" moaned Bailey. "How'd you do that?"

"Never mind. One thing this proves is you did kill those kids, and no one's trying to set you up. If only we could tell who bashed you..."

"I couldn't begin to guess."

"You don't have to. All I'd need to do is line up that bunch and do the same thing..."

"Someone could have sneaked in from the hall. The door was open."

Mustang plopped on a patch of exposed grass. "Great, just great."

"You've got to believe I wouldn't have done it if..."

She waited, but he didn't complete the sentence. "If what?"

"Nothing."

Glancing at his torn shirt sleeve, she saw tiny puncture wounds on the inside of his elbow. “It is drugs, isn’t it?”

He followed her gaze. “I’ve... been having tests done to diagnose what’s been bothering me lately. Those are from having blood drawn.”

“Dr. Bailey, I can force you to be honest and, judging myself harshly, you wouldn’t find it pleasant. If I can light a city block without electricity and set trees ablaze, I can very easily explode your skull.”

Brown-stained loafers backed up the embankment. “What... are you saying?”

“I’m telling you not to screw around with me, sir! Being new to my... situation, I jumped in where I shouldn’t have, and my butt’s on the line for protecting you. Since they’ve dismissed school for the day because of what happened, I should be on the bus home right now. I’ll end up walking a good ten miles because I’m downright stupid.”

“Young lady, I swore to you I didn’t kill those students deliberately. If I was a raging lunatic, don’t you think I would’ve murdered you by now? Believe me, please.”

Under her breath, she grumbled, “I believed Jack Parsons was a good man, and he set me up to kill him. Why should I trust anyone?”

He heard her, however. “That’s a wise philosophy, when you’ve been manipulated unfairly by those who claim to wish you well.” He closed the distance between them, laying his hands gently on her shoulders. “What I say, you must never repeat to another living soul.”

She nodded.

“Your concern about potential drug abuse is unwarranted. A lack of drug use may well be the source of my problem, since I recently stopped taking the anti-psychotic medications prescribed for me over a period of three years while I was incarcerated in California’s state mental institution.”

Mustang shook from his grasp. “What!”

“A secondary reason I no longer practice medicine: I had a full-blown nervous breakdown in the operating room, and critically wounded two surgical nurses and the anesthesiologist. The court committed me, but I finally escaped last summer.”

II

“Oh, hell...”

Bailey had a grip on her biceps now. “You’ve got to understand, I’m perfectly sane. I was going through a bitter divorce; my patient load was overwhelming. No average person could tolerate the stress, and I never claimed to be Superman. I’d already started outpatient treatment, but the anti-depressants prescribed weren’t effective. The prosecutor accused me of not cooperating with the team of therapists, which is why the judge ordered me confined. Being locked in a ward with two dozen bona fide crazies drove me over the edge.”

For all the fear knotting her stomach, Mustang could commiserate with the man. In the months since her power first manifested, her parents had mentioned psychological intervention once a week, on average. Had they known about her thrusting a knife into Jack Parsons’ chest while he lay on a hilltop altar near Boleskine House, she would’ve been shuffled off to the funny farm, herself.

“Why did you stop taking the pills they’d given you?”

“One, I didn’t have a prescription for a refill. On the ward, the orderlies doled out those little babies like gold, keeping the rest under lock and key. Two, I don’t need them. The proper way to quit, though, is to be weaned off the medication, taking smaller and smaller doses, until it’s safe to stop completely. I didn’t have that opportunity.”

“So, that triggered the hallucinations?”

“In the beginning, yes. Once my system grew accustomed to not having the drugs, I thought they’d cease, but that wasn’t the case. I’ve gotten a bit paranoid, too, I suppose. Thinking someone’s chasing me, trying to catch me and take me back.”

“Aren’t they?”

“I doubt it.”

Mustang speculated, “Won’t they find you once the murders hit the news?”

“As long as they don’t show my photo, no.”

“Wilfrid Bailey’s not your real name?”

“Wilfrid Bailey was a retired teacher I met on the bus from Seattle.”

“What happened to him?”

“He’s buried a few hundred feet off Interstate 90, near Missoula.”

The teen knew she was in dire straits when Bailey’s fingers tightened on her arms. Efforts to control her impulsiveness had failed once again, and might cost her life at the hands of what law enforcement classified a serial murderer.

She’d threatened to make his head explode; why shouldn’t she save herself?

Because, Parsons’ death notwithstanding, *she* was not a murderer.

Had not Rachel, her cousin, and Peter O'Donnell advocated positive use of her power, bringing harm to no one, when she'd spent time with them after the family funeral weeks prior? Would not the simple command, "Let go!" break his hold upon her?

The problem with those afflicted by mental instability: natural forces did not react the same with them as with what society deemed normal people, according to Jack Parsons' journals. Bailey might actually increase the pressure on her bones, or snap her neck in one swift motion.

His muscles would cramp eventually, she calculated, and he'd have to unclench them.

Or...

She'd seen more than one of her father's ranch hands thrown from a horse, and suffer a concussion. Gazing into Bailey's brown orbs, she noticed the right pupil dilated, the left contracted. The blow to his head must've been quite forceful.

"You'd better sit down," she advised.

"No. We're going to grab ourselves a car and get out of here."

"You're in no condition to drive. As a doctor, you already know that."

"You can drive."

"The only thing I've ever driven is my dad's lawn tractor, and I ran over three bushes."

That brought a chuckle from his lips, a good sign, in Mustang's book. Indeed, he released her and settled gingerly on the snowy bank.

"I *am* feeling nauseous," admitted Bailey.

From this vantage point, Mustang could see the deep gash toward the back of his scalp. He needed stitches; that much was definite. Convincing him to go to the hospital would be a waste of time.

They didn't have much, as it was.

The sheriff had dispatched K-9 units; excited, barking dogs were tracking them. "One of these days, I'll learn," Mustang lamented. Not only should she have commanded their shoe prints to vanish, but their scent, as well. Nature could be very literal, she was discovering.

Given the threat he posed to himself and others, the girl debated leaving Bailey to be captured. It would be for the best - he'd get needed treatment in the psychiatric unit of some hospital. She edged toward the trees, hoping he wouldn't heed the motion as he struggled not to vomit.

Not watching where she was going, she tripped on an exposed root and tumbled toward the water. Bailey leapt up, seizing a handful of her Pink Floyd t-shirt before she splashed into the icy creek.

His equilibrium disrupted by the concussion, he pitched sideways himself and landed face-down in the stream.

And didn't move.

Chest heaving, Mustang couldn't let the man drown. Reinforced by nature's own strength, she bent and lifted him off the rocky creek bed and, as unswallowed liquid dribbled from his mouth, she carried him into the woods.

"No marks, *and* no scent!" she instructed, trudging through snow drifts in no particular direction. Her head pounded with ideas; none of them seemed feasible. She knew a veterinarian who had offices on the edge of town, but he also sat on the board of county commissioners and would undoubtedly report them to the sheriff. Staff at the emergency medical clinic would ask too many questions. The Duryea's own family physician had treated burn marks on her palms - the result of a lightning bolt transporting her across the Atlantic from Scotland - and believed her suicidal.

Reaching a convenience store parking lot en route to her parents' ranch, Mustang rested Bailey against the wall near the restrooms. Unconscious, she might be able to heal his wound without any... adverse effects stemming from his psychological condition.

Hindsight being 20/20, she regretted her choice.

The man who had usurped Wilfrid Bailey's identity sprang to his feet, a raging bull. "Who are you?" he growled.

Besides the dilated pupils, another symptom of concussion was amnesia, Mustang remembered.

"You're okay, Doc," she soothed. "You're safe. I'm... Elizabeth Duryea, from school."

"Why are we out here, without coats? It's freezing!"

"You ain't kidding, there."

That iron grip closed around her left arm. "What's going on?"

"Look, Doc, something... horrible happened. The cops are chasing you, and I've been dumb enough to try and help you."

"You know who I am?"

"I know where you came from, and what you've done, but not your real name."

"Then, you know too much!" Furtive brown eyes scanned the gas station pumps. A chunky blonde had alighted from her Nissan Ultima and inserted a

credit card in the electronic reader. She'd left the driver's door open and keys in the ignition...

By the time she lifted the nozzle and turned, Bailey had shoved Mustang across the front seat, and started the engine. He activated the door locks and sped away, the car's owner screeching and feebly making chase.

Bailey steered the vehicle south toward Butte, stopping briefly at a remote garage and forcing his hostage to fill the tank with gas. Her mind raced, but as the speedometer topped 90 mph, she dared not jump out the passenger door, or command the radiator to overheat.

One phrase echoed in her head: "You're out of your mind." She wasn't quite certain if it referred to Bailey or herself, or both. When the other students had fled upon seeing the carnage in the biology lab, she should've followed their lead.

Her stomach grumbled, and she laughed in spite of herself.

"What's so funny?" barked her captor.

"I'm hungry, that's all."

"So am I. We'll grab some burgers in the next town."

An odd concession from a near-rabid murderer, the girl mused. She studied his chiseled profile as he drove - the straight nose, thin lips, cleft chin and thick eyebrows. His hair uncombed, his clothes bloodied, he might have been a back-woods survivalist, recently returned to civilization.

Whipping past the fast-food drive-through window, Mustang was lucky to get a soda with her luke-warm sandwich. Another hour and no pursuit, they passed into southern Idaho.

"You realize transporting a minor across state lines is a federal crime," she stated.

"I'm dead anyway, so what does it matter?"

"You don't have to be. You can get help..."

"Their version of help is to load patients with drugs to keep them docile and out of trouble. You end up a walking zombie, unable to think or feel... anything."

"Would you rather feel all this anger, and end up killing innocent students?"

"They attacked *me*. People are always attacking me."

"Did Wilfrid Bailey attack you?" As soon as she spoke the words, she bit her tongue.

“He was going to call the police. I fell asleep on the bus, and he noticed the sheath buckled around my ankle with the Bowie knife. Thought I was a terrorist.”

“So, you killed him with it?”

“No need. Do you know how easily old men’s bones break?”

“Oh, hell...”

Gleaming steel was in his hand almost instantaneously, leveled at her throat. “Teenagers’ bones, too, I suspect.”

Unbidden tears cascaded down Mustang’s cheeks. She could transport herself home with a mere phrase, but what would the lightning bolt do to an innocent woman’s car? She had any number of options, none of them harmless.

Except...

“Melt the blade.”

Hot metal dripped on the shifter console and on Bailey’s skin. He howled in pain, his left hand jerking the steering wheel violently.

The Nissan veered toward a ditch; Bailey slammed both feet on the brake pedal. “What the hell did you do?” he steamed.

“This ends now. There’s an old John Wayne movie called *The Shootist*, in which his character tells a young boy his rules for living. ‘I won’t be wronged, I won’t be insulted, and I won’t be laid a hand on.’ You’ve done all three, and I’ve had enough.”

“You think you can run? I’ll catch you. You think you can beat me in a fight? I outweigh you by fifty pounds.”

She grinned. “Try to take your hands off the steering wheel.”

He couldn’t. “What the...”

The girl had partially liquified the plastic and glued it to his palms. “You’ll be here when the police catch up to you, whether it takes two hours, or two days.”

She opened the door and climbed from the car. It would be a long walk home, unless...

Bailey had a Blackberry, and she could notify the authorities of their location. Such a course would involve a lot of questions, and she wasn’t one to lie - she preferred keeping her mouth shut and avoiding confrontation entirely.

Which is why she wouldn’t be going back to school any time soon.

Still, better to face the music than wear out the soles of her sneakers hiking 200 miles north in the October cold, wearing only a t-shirt and jeans.

A slender hand reached into Bailey’s trouser pocket, freeing the miniature computer. She didn’t anticipate the man’s desperation, and when he head-butted her, she reeled backward and slammed on the gravel shoulder, unconscious.

Brisk slaps across Mustang's face roused her. Bailey hovered over her, leering madly. While she'd been insensate, he'd cracked the car's steering wheel in half, then into smaller pieces, working his hands loose. The fragments lay beside her on the ground.

The crushed Blackberry also lay in a half-frozen puddle. She assumed Bailey had smashed it.

Her head ached dreadfully. Clouds obscured the evening sun, and it had begun to snow - big, fluffy flakes indicative of a coming blizzard. No communication, no transportation, no warm clothes... They were as good as dead.

"Best get a fire built, missy," Bailey snarled, roughly hoisting her upright. "Make it easier for me to cook you. I'd hate to eat you raw."

"You got matches?"

"Nope."

"Expect me to rub two sticks together?"

"You're a clever little bitch. You'll think of something."

Mustang shuffled toward the tree line. "Oh, I'm thinking, all right."

Which is why the low branches of two maple trees converged to trap Bailey when they passed. No amount of human strength could free him from that confinement.

The fire blazed spontaneously in the clearing, and she thawed her chilled backside. The warmth felt good, but by morning, hunger would be a major concern.

Flames rose in a shaft, forty feet high, visible well above the trees. Forest rangers, weather radar stations, residents of nearby towns would undoubtedly see the beacon, Mustang guessed, and investigate the source.

Bailey had given up his fight with the trees, but renewed it upon viewing his companion's handiwork. "What are you, girl?" he bellowed.

"Best you not know, because the shrinks who will be treating you in short order wouldn't believe you."

"You mean, I'm hallucinating all this?"

"That would solve a lot of problems," replied Mustang. "But three kids are dead, and I can't change that." She turned from Bailey, and settled on a decaying log. "Damn you, Jack Parsons!"

"You've got to find the person who hit me!" the man shrieked. "He's the one who's guilty of murder..."

The teen had already deliberated about pursuing that aspect of the situation, but it still didn't resurrect the trio who never thought attending school

could be fatal. “The shrinks won’t believe that story, either, since there’s no scar on your head.”

“What!”

The day’s turmoil had taken its toll on Mustang, she rested her throbbing cranium on the wood and dozed. Somewhere in the recesses of her brain, Bailey continued his tirade, and faint sirens floated across the night air.

“Miss, Miss...”

A husky contralto penetrated the girl’s slumber. She opened hazel eyes to find a lean brunette in EMT uniform and unzipped hunting jacket squatting beside her in the pre-dawn glow. A two-inch blanket of snow covered her, as well.

“Are you injured?”

Mustang pointed to the bump above her right ear.

“That’s a real goose-egg, but nothing serious,” offered the paramedic.

“Care to explain what you’re doing out here?”

“We were stranded. The car...”

“We? There was someone else?”

Jolting vertical, Mustang glanced around the clearing. The trees which had entangled Bailey drooped, twisted and broken. “When I go to sleep, the power must...” she reasoned.

Countered the woman, “What are you talking about?”

“Nothing. Nothing.” Mustang ran stiff fingers through her disheveled auburn tresses. The fire had extinguished itself, too. Another lesson learned. “The guy used the name Wilfrid Bailey, and posed as a teacher at Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High in Montana. He killed three students yesterday.”

“There’s an APB out on him. There was mention of a hostage...”

“He can’t have gotten far. Frostbite would’ve set in by now.”

“We didn’t see anyone along the road miles in either direction. Maybe he hitched a ride?”

“I pity anyone who stopped for him.”

The paramedic supported Mustang around her waist as she stood. “You said he *used* the name Wilfrid Bailey? What’s his real name?”

“I don’t know. He’s an escaped mental patient from California, who killed the real Wilfrid Bailey near Missoula.”

Two male EMTs emerged from the trees with a stretcher. The women urged Mustang toward it.

“I don’t need that. I’m fine, really.”

“If we don’t take you to the hospital for an examination, the state police are going to take you to jail.”

“What for?”

“A sixteen year old runaway? They’ve got to notify your parents...”

“I didn’t run away.”

“Then, you *were* Bailey’s hostage, and the detectives will want to question you. Still means a trip into Idaho Falls.”

III

Little difference in being a prisoner or a witness, Mustang determined after three hours sitting on a plain metal chair in a cramped, mirrored cubicle. She’d watched enough TV crime dramas to know another room existed on the other side of that reflective wall, where speakers augmented every answer and suspicious investigators observed her every move.

They’d supplied her with a cold ham and cheese sandwich and can of root beer, at any rate, as an assortment of men and women filed in and out through the morning. One burly sergeant, when she told him she carried no ID, threatened to send her to the juvenile lock-up.

“When I got on the bus yesterday, how was I to know I’d end up in such a predicament?” the teen spat.

“Don’t they make you wear ID badges at school?”

“I only started back a few days ago. They haven’t issued mine yet.”

A prim matron shooed the man out moments later. “Sorry about that,” she apologized. “He’s a bit over-zealous in his duties.”

“No harm done.”

Gnarled fingers drew a folded sheet from the woman’s uniform shirt pocket and spread it on the pocked table top. “Is this the man who held you hostage?”

The post office-style wanted poster boasted a fairly recent color photo of a grey-bearded man listed as Dr. Jonas Fairchild. No aliases were listed, though Mustang knew at least one: Wilfrid Bailey.

“That’s him, without the whiskers.”

“You don’t know how lucky you are to have escaped alive. According to the psychiatrists at the California State Hospital, triple doses of standard medications were required to keep him from smashing through windows and doors on the ward, or assaulting other patients. He’d kill you as soon as give you the time of day.”

“Is the story about his divorce and the nervous breakdown true?”

“His wife divorced him because he brutalized her mercilessly. He did attack co-workers in a surgical suite after a judge issued the final decree awarding Mrs. Fairchild the house, cars and \$10,000 a month alimony...”

“Geez!”

“They never figured out how he escaped from the locked ward.”

Once Mustang’s official statement was typed, printed and signed, she was released in the custody of Joe and Maggie Duryea, who weren’t thrilled at having to drive from the ranch on a busy weekday. Neither inquired about their daughter’s well-being; she didn’t expect any solicitous concern.

“School’s closed until next Monday, so the students can be counseled, if they need it, and funeral arrangements made for the dead,” her father announced. “More reason for you to lay around the house and do nothing.”

“Since when do I ‘do nothing’?” steamed the girl. “I’m out in the pastures as much as the hired hands, breaking the horses, feeding and watering the colts...”

Maggie interspersed, “Both of you, calm down!”

Not another word was exchanged the entire trip home.

Lying awake in her own bedroom that night, Mustang puzzled over Fairchild/Bailey’s request she find the person who’d hit him on the head. Innate curiosity drove her to accept the task, simply to reveal who would stoop so low as to attack a teacher.

She assumed the murderer himself would have hijacked another car and fled thousands of miles. Montana and Idaho officials were working together on the case, and had assured her safety from any reprisals.

With a madman, you never could tell, though.

She resisted sleep, given how her power had been negated during moments of unconsciousness. Reading through Parsons’ journals - swiped from Boleskine’s Gate Lodge against FBI orders - no reference had been made about the need to remain alert. Experiments using her command of nature had been simple up to that point; besides controlling it, she realized she had much to learn about its limitations.

Her eyelids finally closed, she dreamed of Fairchild creeping through her bedroom window, kept unlocked so she could sneak in and out of the house without her parents’ knowledge. He towered menacingly over her, and when she woke, he bound and gagged her, and hauled her off to a flame-engulfed black SUV.

Really waking in the wee hours, her breath came shallow and fast, and sweat moistened her brow. She sat up the remainder of the night, watching cable news reports of Fairchild’s flight on the small television next to her bed.

The assortment of photos flashed across the screen astounded Mustang. Blood splatters on the classroom door, Fairchild's beardless school ID image, the damaged Nissan, and the federal wanted poster were mixed with interviews of other teachers and the principal, friends and relatives of the slain students. The Nissan's owner hadn't seen Mustang, so her status as a hostage wasn't mentioned. The driver of a second vehicle - a Jeep Cherokee - had his vehicle stolen by a man fitting Fairchild's description, evidently while Mustang had slept on the log with the flaming pillar signaling their location. Federal agents were tracking all leads; they'd even set up a toll-free tip hotline.

The lingering conundrum: why hadn't Fairchild strangled her once he'd extricated himself from the trees? Or did he fear her too much?

That fear might give her an advantage, in that he wouldn't track her. Despite the nightmare, she convinced herself the police were correct: Fairchild was long gone.

She didn't forget, come sunrise, about heading to the school in search of clues to the initial assailant. What better time to wander the corridors seeking a hastily discarded blunt instrument than when the building was closed?

After riding the pastures to break ice on the horses' water troughs, the teen didn't return home for breakfast. Heartbeat, her pinto, trotted easily along country roads, covering the miles to Canyon Creek in less than an hour. Wrapped in a parka, boots, gloves and knit hat, these cold temperatures didn't bother Mustang.

The structure, of course, was secured - except one service door near the cafeteria. Clean-up crews flowed in and out, the girl saw, with paint cans, rollers, buckets and boxes of floor tiles.

No one would be able to tell a tragedy had occurred in the biology lab.

They'd remember, just the same, Mustang realized.

She tethered Heartbeat out of sight near the baseball diamond. Once inside, she slunk along the Industrial Arts hall until the crew completed their work. A discreet view of the parking lot let her watch vans and pickups depart at lunch time.

A creepy sensation made her skin tingle, walking alone through the silent labyrinth. Creepy, yet empowering. Standing in the main hallway, she still whispered, "Open the locker or door where the weapon which struck the man called Wilfrid Bailey is hidden."

Origins unknown, a mysterious wind blew past her along both walls, rattling metal doors and whistling through slatted air vents. Mustang snickered, wondering how many lockers would've exploded outward had she been hunting

for illegal drugs. Even in these remote environs, the young people still had access to marijuana, meth, cocaine and Ecstasy.

Rounds of the first floor resulted in nothing. She took the quest up the worn stone staircase to the next level. Doubts were nagging at her, though; what if the police had already found the bloodied implement?

Investigators must've interviewed students who'd been in the classroom when Fairchild went ballistic; one or more of them must've detailed the events...

Unless they were protecting the assailant.

Ahead, a janitor's closet had opened. A length of 3/4-inch copper piping was propped in the rear corner, behind a collection of brooms and mops. Whoever had tried to wash off the blood had left a few messy red streaks to dry.

That could be anyone, given these rooms were unattended through the regular school day, in case a spill or other accident needed to be cleaned. Two janitors in a building of 800 students, the men had more important duties than emergency housekeeping.

An ordinary youngster might have been at a loss, nothing really proven by finding the pipe. Mustang had resources others lacked, however. Using a tattered rag to pluck the weapon from its place, she declared, "Show me to the locker of the person whose fingerprints are on this pipe."

Nothing stirred, a discouraging reaction. Not a student, evidently, she surmised. A teacher, or staff member, perhaps? she wondered. The administrative offices would be locked, so rummaging through personnel files wouldn't be possible. The library should be accessible...

Groping through the dimness, she snatched the most recent yearbook off the shelf. Opening it at random on a table, she murmured, "Illuminate the name of the person who attacked Wilfrid Bailey."

Pages rifled by unseen hands settled on a disappointing leaf: Terence Howard, guidance counselor. The box above the caption bore the note, "No Photo Available."

Mustang had never met the elusive Mr. Howard, who focused on negotiating college scholarships for under-achieving athletes. He'd joined the guidance department late in the previous school year, which explained the absence of his picture.

Come Monday, though, she'd make a point to introduce herself.

Or, sooner.

Overhead, fluorescent lights blinded her momentarily. She peered between the stacks at an odd assortment of adults, bearing briefcases and boxes of tissue. It took a moment for Mustang's memory to click: her father had told her counselors

would be at the school for those who needed to talk. One of them had to be Terence Howard.

After an orientation session, the professionals dispersed to their assigned rooms, providing privacy for whatever anger, grief or other emotions the students would display. Undetected in her hiding place, Mustang noticed a chart on the library's circulation desk, which the counselors consulted before exiting the chamber. Howard's name would be on it, and he'd be easily located.

Getting out of the library would be no easy feat. She secreted the copper pipe behind a shelf of reference books, sputtering, "I wish I was invisible," and sensed a ripple in the air around her. She took a step; none of the adults turned toward the motion. She continued on her way, taking note that Howard was in room 113, where she'd suffered through many a boring freshman history lecture.

Rather than confront the man, she concluded remaining concealed might be wisest. She could eavesdrop on his conversations, and glean some knowledge of his background.

Except, over the course of three hours, no one entered the room. Mustang took up a position over his left shoulder, and watched him doodle on a legal pad. He held a dialogue with himself, also, which left the girl doubting his sanity more than Fairchild's.

"You should've stayed on the force," it began. "You're wasting your talents here."

"The wife didn't like me working nights and weekends, and getting shot. This job is safer; better schedule, better pay."

All told, the paunchy, sandy-haired individual had been star of a small college basketball team in Wyoming, and when the NBA didn't draft him, he became a police officer. Twenty years on the squad, he'd advanced only to the rank of corporal. He blamed others for never acknowledging his potential.

"If only Fairchild hadn't escaped, I'd have the reward money, and could put this hole of a town behind me."

"Oh, hell..."

Yes, she'd spoken aloud, and he'd heard.

"Who's there?"

"Your conscience," Mustang bluffed. "I know what you did, and that you'll never prosper through dishonesty."

"Capturing an escaped lunatic isn't dishonest. It can be damned profitable, when the ex-wife is living in fear for her life."

"Greed, then. Equally disgusting."

"I deserve what I can get."

“Did Fairchild deserve being struck from behind by a coward?”

Howard’s head moved like a snake’s, trying to determine the source of the voice. “There’s a difference between cowardice and intelligence. No man in his right mind would face Fairchild head-on with a pair of cuffs. I would’ve ended up dead, like those kids.”

“Instead of protecting them, you ran like a frightened rabbit.”

“Sure, wouldn’t you?”

“I stayed,” the teen confessed, “and set him free.”

He bellowed, “WHO ARE YOU?”

Three counselors poked their heads through the door. “Terry, who are you talking to? It’s time to go.”

Fleshy cheeks blushed. He tucked the legal pad in his backpack and followed them from the room.

Mustang slipped through the door just before it slammed shut.

Now she had the required evidence, what would she do? The sheriff wouldn’t look kindly on this late reporting of major facts in the case; the state police post was too far to ride Heartbeat - who’d be chomping at the bit to get back to the ranch, a warm barn and bucket of oats. Out in the afternoon sun, she estimated an hour to ride home before twilight hampered her view of the road, dangerous in winter because one misstep in a pothole could fatally cripple a horse.

The copper pipe would keep where it was hidden, she decided, and steered her mount east.

A deputy riding a magnificent quarter horse intercepted her 100 yards from her parents’ driveway. “You called Mustang?” he snapped.

“Yes.”

“We’ve been searching hours for you, young lady. Your parents are worried sick.”

“I doubt that,” she thought silently, then asked, “Why the fuss? I’ve been gone longer than this before.”

“Jonas Fairchild was captured near Reno, Nevada, late last night, but he escaped while being transported back here to face charges.”

“So quick? Shouldn’t there have been an extradition hearing, or something?”

“The judge ruled at 9:00 AM, and he was placed in an armored vehicle, with two federal guards. Did a Houdini on his straight jacket and broke both their necks before they could fire a shot.”

“You think he’ll come after me?”

“Frankly, we don’t care if he does. You’re the reason he got away the first time. If he thinks you’ve spilled your guts, though, he might risk taking revenge...”

“Revenge isn’t his motivation.”

“Okay, smart ass, what is?”

That attitude was one reason Mustang had little respect for law enforcement. “Self-preservation. If he thinks he’s being threatened, he strikes.”

“We’ll make you seem like a very real threat, then.”

“No.”

“You can’t refuse.”

“Like hell, I can’t.”

Abruptly, his horse reared and bolted through the underbrush, the deputy clutching the reins for dear life. Heartbeat whinnied what sounded like a protest; Mustang laughed.

“I’m sorry, boy. I don’t like being a pawn in a game I can’t win.”

The pinto comfortable in its stall, she reluctantly climbed the porch steps and crossed the threshold. Maggie, cooking dinner, and Joe, watching the evening news, glared at her.

“The police were here, girl,” grumbled her father. “What kind of trouble are you in now?”

“No trouble, Dad. That mess at school yesterday...”

The phone rang. Maggie plucked the receiver off the wall, then motioned to her daughter.

Tentatively, Mustang accepted the instrument. “Hello?”

“This time, I’ll leave *you* trussed up in the trees, and see how you like it.”

IV

Logic dictated if Fairchild had the Duryea’s phone number, he also had their address. Mustang placed the phone in its cradle after the connection had been broken, staring out the window at the setting sun. He might’ve been calling from Arizona, for all she knew, but best not to take chances.

“Who was it, dear?” queried Maggie.

“Don’t know. They hung up.”

She skipped dinner and retired to her bedroom. Ideas for booby traps positioned around the ranch filtered through her mind, to warn the family should an intruder trespass in the dead of night. Better to remove herself from the danger zone entirely, and a safe haven lay a short distance along the drive.

The skeleton crew of off-season ranch hands had departed for a sweep of the south to buy horses, leaving the bunk house deserted. The girl could sack out in the foreman's quarters, with a window facing the main house. Should Fairchild attempt to eliminate the threat he considered her, she would see him coming long before he achieved his goal.

And, hoisting herself across the bedroom sill, her parents would never know she wasn't snug in her own bed.

That first night's vigil left her to sleep through the day, fulfilling her father's accusation of being lazy. Had he known the truth, she wasn't certain he would've cared about anything other than the prospective danger to his livelihood.

The second night, her senses were alerted by deer foraging for food among the snow drifts. Chiding herself for a growing paranoia, she dozed fitfully.

Early Saturday, the tell-tale crunching of boots on the ice-packed drive broke into disjointed dreams. She rolled off the mattress into a crouch, able to see through frosty glass yet not be seen. The new moon provided no illumination, so it wasn't until a straight-backed, well-groomed figure approached the porch, activating motion-sensitive flood lights, that she recognized him.

Fairchild, and no doubt.

He wore not orange prison scrubs, but a red turtleneck, jeans and leather jacket. Since his escape, he must've holed up somewhere with a shower, and stolen new clothes. He appeared unarmed; Mustang recalled the ankle sheath and Bowie knife he'd sported in the stolen Nissan. Then again, his bare hands had done sufficient damage on their own.

She stepped onto the bunk house stoop, a blanket wrapped around her sweatshirt/pajamas. She whistled shrilly.

Fairchild halted in mid-step, glancing over his shoulder.

"You want me, come get me!" Mustang hailed in quiet tones, though her voice carried on a summoned breeze to his ears.

Her mistake on this occasion: forgetting her sneakers.

Not that she intended to intimidate him with her toughness or courage. He'd been correct in his ability to win a physical conflict; that solid build masked his actual age, denoted by lines furrowing his brow and cheeks. Those brown eyes gleamed in the darkness like a car's headlights, and his lips twitched in a malevolent half-grin.

She scurried inside the bunk house and had one shoe tied before he loomed in the doorway.

"A proper position for one who'll soon be begging for mercy," Fairchild gloated over her kneeling form.

Mustang countered, "This isn't like you. You didn't go back and kill your ex-wife after escaping from the hospital, and you could've ripped me to shreds while I slept by the fire, if you wanted revenge. Why did you come?"

"Something I heard while in federal custody. It seems they're keeping better track of you than they ever did of me."

She didn't know how to respond to this bombshell.

"They were quite enthralled by the Idaho State Police report about the pillar of fire, the damaged car, and finding you alone in the woods. The past few months, they've been monitoring Montana weather service bulletins about unexplained lightning and rain originating near Canyon Creek."

Fairchild wasn't lying. Jack Parsons' own tales of FBI surveillance confirmed that agency would be interested in anyone exhibiting powers similar to his.

"That doesn't account for why you're here."

"If I turn you over to them, they'll go easy on me."

"I haven't been in hiding. They could find me if they really wanted," the teen sniffed.

The former surgeon sat on the bed. "There's a millisecond frozen in time, when a person realizes they're going to die, when every ounce of fear is visible in their eyes. I've seen it, so I know. The Feds had that same look as they discussed your disposition."

"And you think you can accomplish what they're afraid to do?"

"You're harmless when you're unconscious."

A needle was jabbed into her right bicep. "Eventually, I'll wake up, and you better be long gone..."

Hazel orbs opened to stare at a white-washed ceiling in a room with bars on a lone window and solid metal door. The only fixture was the slab on which she lay, welded to the smooth cement wall.

A hospital psych ward, a prison - she wasn't sure which, but she didn't like it. By the angle of visible sunlight, it could be late afternoon, meaning she'd slept 12 hours or more.

Trying to sit up, she fell back, dizzy. Whatever sedative Fairchild had injected, the side effects were nauseating. Or, had he done it so she'd know how he felt with the concussion?

"When I find him, he won't have a chance to answer the question."

"Don't be vindictive, Miss Duryea."

The door had opened, and a unpleasantly familiar official entered.

"Ben Espinoza!"

The athletically-built Hispanic FBI instructor smiled.

“Why aren’t you lecturing wannabe agents at the academy in Quantico?”

“Your name came up on the daily watch-list, so I dropped what I was doing. Nice to see you again.”

“Only if you enjoyed your dip in Loch Ness,” quipped Mustang.

“I wrote that incident off to your... youth and reckless use of your power. I wouldn’t expect such behavior now.”

“When you’re dripping wet, you’ll realize how wrong you are.” She managed to boost herself on one elbow. “Was what Fairchild told me the truth?”

“About being an escapee from a California mental hospital, yes. About killing Wilfrid Bailey and three students, yes.”

“About the FBI keeping tabs on me.”

“After what my cadets saw at Boleskine, I didn’t have much choice but to open a file on you.”

“You could just as easily close it, too, I wouldn’t wonder.”

“Not when you’re setting trees on fire, lighting up half of Boise, and starting cattle stampedes to obstruct ATF agents in performance of their duty.”

“Fine, I’ll stop. I didn’t ask for this, as it is.”

“You know that’s unlikely. It’d be like pulling your teeth. You enjoy eating too much.”

“So, are you filing charges against me?”

“The outcome would be the same had we dragged Jack Parsons into court. No matter the sentence, he’d have been free in a matter of hours from the best maximum security prison.”

“Yet, your boys kept hounding him, and will do the same to me?”

“Parsons was suspect because he mixed two incompatible interests.”

“Occult rituals with rocket science?”

“Exactly. With you, we don’t have that problem.”

“Yet.”

Espinoza shrugged. “True. You could pursue a nuclear science major in college, sparking interest in every department on the Hill.”

“I’ll be lucky to make it through high school,” snickered Mustang.

“Your continued truancy is a local problem, but the stunts you pull when you *are* in school...”

“What do you know...”

He bent and gazed into her eyes. “You should be feeling better. C’mon.”

Hesitantly accepting his outstretched hand, the girl rose slowly. He was right, the sickly sensation had dissipated. She accompanied him from what she

discovered to be a holding cell in the county jail to a cluttered office. He picked up a remote and pointed it at a TV/DVD combo.

The video which played made Mustang cringe. She'd seen it before, from an opposing perspective: Fairchild's.

"Where'd you get this?" she stammered.

"Every room at your school had security cameras installed after the tragedy at Columbine. All we had to do after this... incident was retrieve the disks."

She watched Bailey/Fairchild checking his students' progress on their experiment, then approach the chalk board. Terence Howard slunk into the lab - a feat for one of his weight - and bashed the teacher with the copper pipe. Fairchild staggered as his students rushed forward; he whirled to face them with the cast saw spinning. The blood sprayed so far, it even hit the camera lens.

"You doing anything with Mr. Howard?" asked Mustang.

"Took us awhile to ID him, since only the back of his head showed on the feed. Found the weapon stashed in the school library..."

She smirked. "My fault."

"Your fault?" He exhaled loudly. "Oh, right. We could slap him with felony assault, but it'd be hard to make it stick, since Fairchild bears no wounds from the blow."

"My fault," repeated Mustang.

"Next thing you'll tell me is you can raise the dead."

"Haven't tried that, yet."

Bristling, Espinoza fast-forwarded to the aftermath, when she assisted Fairchild from the room. That sequence blanked out, followed by the scene in the boys' restroom, when they crawled through the window to make good their escape.

"Oh, hell..."

"Had he not taken you hostage and driven to another state, you'd be on your way to the women's penitentiary as we speak," the FBI agent declared. "By turning you over to us, Fairchild blew his opportunity for an insanity plea, anyway."

"How so?"

"He clearly understood the seriousness of his plight, and the impact cutting a deal would have. He'll only see the world through electrified razor wire from now on."

"Life without parole?"

"In solitary confinement, to boot."

Mustang leaned against the battered wood desk. "What about me?"

“We could get you on breaking and entering.”

“Huh?”

The last clip on the DVD showed her wandering the halls in search of Howard’s weapon. On the periphery of the counselor’s orientation in the library, she was clearly visible one second, and gone the next.

“Neat trick.” He switched off the TV. “A state trooper will run you home.”

“I’m in Helena?”

Espinoza nodded.

“I want to see him.”

“Don’t go sentimental; someone like you is better off resisting emotional entanglements.”

“I knew that long before I ever met Jack Parsons,” scoffed Mustang. “Five minutes.”

“You thinking of breaking him out?”

“You think I’m that stupid?”

“You’re young. Stupidity comes with the territory.”

“Gee, thanks.”

He escorted her to a row of regular cells, where assorted petty criminals paced and glowered at their captors. Wearing grey-blue prison scrubs, Fairchild stood, motionless, in the last, trying to catch the glimmers of the sunset through a high, barred window.

“Five minutes,” Espinoza authorized, withdrawing to the guards’ station.

Fairchild turned toward the voice and, seeing his visitor, retreated to the corner, his face a twisted mask of terror.

“I’m awake now,” Mustang greeted. “I believe you promised to truss me up between two trees...”

“They lied to me,” came the panicked baritone. “They swore to protect me from you...”

“And who protected me from you, Doc? I suppose I should be satisfied you’re going up the river for good.”

“What! They said the federal prosecutor wouldn’t press for more than 5-10 years...”

“Five years, or fifty. A hell of a way to waste your life.”

He rushed the bars, brown eyes sparkling with hope. “You can get me out!”

“Sure.”

Behind the bullet-proof glass of the guards’ station, Ben Espinoza scowled. He signaled six uniformed men to draw their weapons.

The cell door audibly unlatched and swung open, without aid of human hands. Over-confident, Fairchild sauntered toward the gap, slamming into an invisible barrier.

“What the...”

“Joke’s on you, Doc. I *could* get you out, but I won’t. I thought giving you a chance to tell your side of the story was the right thing to do, and I was wrong. You’re where you deserve to be.”

“What about you, freak?” he raged. “I met hundreds of your kind in the wacko factory. You’ll go off the deep end someday, yourself. You’ll look in the mirror and not recognize your own face, doubting your own sanity...”

The cell door clanged shut. “I already do that.” She strode away. “While your horrendous deeds replay through your head day-in, day-out, I’ll forget this week with ease, and wake a bit wiser for the pain tomorrow morning.”

The guards had holstered their pistols by the time the teen rejoined Espinoza at the locked exit. “You’re nuts, y’know?” he muttered.

“You said it yourself: I’m young. Some days, I feel really old, but I’m still young - too young to be thrown into these crises.”

“Including being constantly watched by the government?”

“Especially that. Can’t you call off your dogs?”

“Tone down your antics, steer clear of wanted criminals, and I’ll see what I can do. Surrendering Parsons’ journals would score big points in your favor, as well.”

“I’d burn them first.”

“That might be for the best, but I’ll let you slide.”

“Sounds like a deal to me.”

As long as I can control myself, echoed inside her skull.

Mustang battled an odd agitation during the ride home in the state police cruiser. Whether the residual effects of the sedative, or anxiety about her parents’ uncaring response to her absences, she couldn’t pinpoint. She considered confining herself permanently to her bedroom, to prevent future unfortunate errors in judgment.

“Growing up amounts to one lesson after another,” she sighed as the vehicle fish-tailed on a patch of ice. From Jack Parsons, she’d learned to be careful who she told about her power - which is why Joe and Maggie remained ignorant on that front. Using the natural forces to bring no harm to others stemmed from conversations with her cousin Rachel and Peter O’Donnell. Wilfrid Bailey/Jonas Fairchild taught her to leave criminal investigations to the professionals.

Still, isolation would serve no purpose, besides increasing her cynicism about life. Only through interaction with people could she expand the parameters of her knowledge about the ways of the world and her place in it.

If she had one.

Alighting from the car on the drive near the ranch house, Mustang detoured into the barn before heading indoors. She refilled Heartbeat's food and water, and stroked his mane lovingly. Her place just might be among the horses she loved so much.

She wouldn't mind that, at all.