

The Mustang Chronicles:

Truant Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

Elizabeth “Mustang” Duryea heard slow, measured footsteps through deep snow long before she detected their source. She’d ridden her pinto, Heartbeat, around the pastures of her father’s Montana ranch twice that morning, to ensure ice hadn’t accumulated on the water troughs, preventing the valuable stock from drinking their fill. Bales of hay were replenished by a skeleton crew of hands who stayed in the bunkhouse through the horrendous winters; she presumed the approaching individual, bundled in heavy, quilted jacket, insulated boots, green knit cap, scarf, and black leather gloves, to be of that number.

No such luck.

“Are you Lizzie?” shouted an Eastern-accented tenor.

The short-tempered redhead retorted, “No one who knows me calls me that.”

“I don’t know you, and I’d rather not know you - especially not in this damned weather. I’m from Canyon Creek School District. Why aren’t you at school?”

Oh, hell, Mustang cursed inwardly. The truant officer.

Not her fault, really, that she couldn’t safely attend school, what with the powers bequeathed her by Jack Parsons, occultist and scientist, causing inconceivable troubles.

“Well?” the man pressed.

“You look half-frozen. How ‘bout some hot cocoa, or coffee?”

“I had some at the house, before your mother sent me out to find you. She swore you got on the bus this morning...”

Maggie Duryea, worn from years of keeping house for a horse breeder, had been washing the breakfast dishes when Mustang bid her a cheery farewell, promptly dumping her books in the barn’s tack room and saddling Heartbeat. Her father, Joe, could be anywhere on the sprawling acreage.

The 17-year-old extended her hand toward the official. “Climb up.”

With surprising agility, the man obliged, gripping Mustang’s parka around the waist as they trotted along narrow paths of trampled snow.

“You didn’t answer my question,” he stated.

She countered, “You’re not from these parts.”

“Very perceptive. Originally, I’m from England. I attended Princeton University, before accepting a position as history teacher at an exclusive Boston girl’s school.”

“This ain’t Boston.”

“I... have held other posts in recent years.”

Not until the pair dismounted near a brick, three-bedroom domicile did Mustang get a close look at the man’s features. Beneath the cap, his tousled brown hair swirled around small ears, across a high, smooth forehead. A sharp jawline, straight nose and piercing brown eyes beneath full, naturally-arched brows might’ve been modeled after a Greek statue. He wore a grey turtleneck sweater and black wool trousers.

Mrs. Duryea poked her curly head out the door, shivering as a gust of wind blew the panel inward. “I see you found her, Mr. Griffin!”

“Indeed, ma’am,” he responded, hurrying into the warmth of the living room, Mustang on his heels. “Just when I thought I’d walked all the way to the Canadian border, there she was, not a guilty bone in her body.”

“Why should I feel guilty?” challenged Mustang. “I’ve done nothing wrong.”

Maggie’s tongue clucked accusingly. “From what Mr. Griffin told me, you haven’t been to school for the past month!”

Not since Jonas Fairchild, alias Wilfrid Bailey, had committed mass murder in the building.

“Sorry, Mom. I...”

“May end up in the county’s juvenile detention facility, if you don’t comply with the regulations,” snapped the slightly built Griffin, having shed his outer garments, his backside facing the roaring fire.

“Your father won’t be pleased,” Maggie commented. “He’ll be back from Helena any time.”

Teeth grit, Mustang knew her parents only cared about their social standing in the region. They’d allowed Mustang to pretty much do as she chose for the past five years. In fact, they’d sent her to her grandmother’s in Massachusetts to be rid of her, which is how she ended up in Scotland, where Jack Parsons cursed her with the ability to manipulate the elements.

At the utterance of a chance word.

“Might I trouble you for some of that delightful coffee?” wondered Griffin, now thawing his slender fingers.

“Certainly.”

Shuffling to the kitchen, Maggie could neither see nor hear what ensued.

“This is your final notice, Lizzie,” the truant officer snarled. “If you’re not in class by the first bell on Monday, the police will be dispatched to arrest you.”

Mustang’s fists clenched at his use of the name she despised. “Don’t threaten me.”

To confirm her proclamation, a weak electrical shock ran through Griffin's arms. He recoiled from the flames, checking his palms for burns. "What are you about, young lady?"

"Death and destruction, mostly." She chuckled wryly. "Wanna see me torch a tree?"

Hastily, Griffin collected his coat, hat and gloves. "You're mad! Never in my career..."

"Career?" echoed Mustang. "You're a liar! You're just out of college, no more than 25."

"For your information, I'm far older, and I fully intend to recommend to the school administrators that you be committed to the nearest mental institution for observation."

Mustang bristled. "As you say in your homeland, 'Not bloody likely.'"

Her mother transported a steaming mug into the cozy chamber, which Griffin refused. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Duryea. I have urgent business in town. I must take my leave of you and your... daughter."

"I promise, Mr. Griffin, she'll be at school bright and early on Monday."

"Oh... I'll be seeing her before then, I'm sure."

From the picture window, the teenager watched him trudge to a maroon Ford SUV and, as he touched the ignition, she reinforced her warning with another jolt of current. His head whipped toward her, thin lips scowling.

Mustang laughed as tires spun in the icy slush, and the vehicle's rear fish-tailed on the gravel drive. Subconsciously, though, she realized he would exert every effort to make good on his vow to lock her in a padded cell.

Not that a cell could hold her or, for that matter, any form of confinement devised by human beings.

Diligence would be the order of the day, nonetheless. Since she'd discovered a vulnerability to her power - if she slept, she could be subject to attack - she'd been increasing her control, on all levels. Her anger remained too... spontaneous, and she could do horrible things when angered.

Joe Duryea presided over a tense dinner that evening; not two sentences spoken by the trio at table. Baked chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, and beans frozen the previous summer were chewed and swallowed, then plates cleared without any discussion of earlier events.

Before settling in his favorite armchair to read the newspaper, Joe announced, "I want you to drive into town with me tomorrow, girl."

Mustang retired to her bedroom, where she switched on a small television, flipping through cable channels until she found an old Errol Flynn movie. Already

dark beyond her window, she glimpsed headlights on the road past leafless trees, unmoving and ominous.

When five sets of lights converged on the first, Mustang muttered an oath. Truant Officer Griffin's "urgent business" had involved obtaining court papers and police support.

"Bastard," she grumbled, dousing her table lamp to get a better view of the cadre struggling to navigate the woods without illumination. "I hope the snow buries you and your... friends."

Promptly, a sinkhole ten feet in diameter opened below the group, and down the shadowy figures tumbled amidst cries of surprise and pain. Mustang observed her father tugging on his hooded winter jacket as he rushed from the house to investigate the disturbance, while Maggie hovered on the threshold.

Block and tackle, ranch hands from the bunkhouse, and Joe's Chevy Suburban were required to extricate the victims from their unusual trap. To Mustang's dismay, they were invited to recover from the ordeal near the fire, while sipping tea.

When she trod along the hall toward the kitchen for a glass of milk and some chocolate chip cookies, six pistols raised in her direction. Joe and Maggie, who'd been chatting casually with their guests, tried to rise, only to be ordered back onto the cushions by the damp and frustrated Griffin.

"After what you've been through, Mr. Griffin, you really want to do this?" Mustang goaded. "Here? Now?"

"If you believe yourself responsible for a clearly involuntary phenomenon, then you are dangerously insane, and these men have been charged with detaining you for psychological evaluation."

"They can't do a thing if they're dead."

For the briefest instant, the Glocks quavered, then simultaneously recovered. Mustang raised her hands, to assure them she possessed no - tangible - weapon, yet one itchy trigger finger squeezed...

Eight bullets riddled the wall; they missed their target entirely.

Joe rose, enraged. "What the devil do you think you're doing, damaging my house?"

Typical, mused Mustang. More worried about his property, not what might've happened to her, if she hadn't deflected the projectiles.

Griffin, for his part, bellowed about the inferior marksmanship of the sheriff's deputies. Maggie instructed the officers to leave, which they did with myriad apologies and confusion, blaming the fiasco on disorientation caused by

their fall into the hole. The instigator of the mission, however, remained immobile, glaring at Mustang.

Who merrily aimed a stray spark from the grate toward his trousers. “Your pants are on fire, Mr. Griffin.”

He sniffed, and twisted his neck as far as possible, a plume of white smoke rising from the black fabric. Maggie dumped a half-full cup of tea on his leg, to extinguish the flame. With a shudder, he managed a feeble, “Thank you, Mrs. Duryea.”

Disgusted, he snatched his quilted jacket off the coat rack and stormed into the night.

Mustang’s parents shrugged at each other, then resumed their previous activities. Leaving the plaster peppered with holes, the girl returned to *The Adventures of Don Juan*.

Her Saturday morning rounds completed, she rode on the Suburban’s passenger seat into Canyon Creek, her father uncommunicative, per his custom. She wished he would ask her about Griffin, or inquire after her reasons for not attending school, so she could divulge the truth to him.

Joe Duryea simply wasn’t concerned with anything other than practical aspects of operating his ranch.

When the tan overcoat-clad Griffin confronted Mustang during her meanderings through the feed store, she deliberately restrained herself from collapsing nearby shelves loaded with dog toys on his arrogant head.

“You don’t give up, do you?” she mocked.

That Eastern tenor drawled, “You... intrigue me.”

“Oh, hell...”

“Throughout my career, I encountered quite a selection of eccentrics, but never anyone like you.”

She grunted sarcastically, “And, to think, yesterday, you didn’t want to know me.”

“I don’t like chasing through a snowbound forest, nor do I appreciate spending my off hours with inept law enforcement personnel, failing in our objective. But, grasping that said failure occurred through no fault of theirs - or mine...”

“Got your curiosity up, eh?”

The scowl transformed into a minuscule grin.

“What do you want, besides me in school?”

“Answers to some burning questions.”

“You looking to get burned again?”

Not appreciating this pun, Griffin's brown orbs squinted at her. "Can two civilized people not hold a conversation without..."

"Here? Now?"

"There's a little coffee shop..."

"And what should I tell my father?"

"Tell him... you need to buy a new pair of sneakers for gym class."

"Lie?"

"You seem to have lied to them these many months," he remarked.

"Not so. They didn't ask, and I didn't volunteer the information."

"Technicalities, technicalities."

The girl sighed, "Give me ten minutes."

Griffin acquiesced, retreating to the implement aisle. Mustang pretended to admire an end cap display of farmer's overalls, prior to sidling toward the exit. Her father stood at the check out register, discussing frozen water pipes and the previous summer's gas line rupture near the town hall.

That planted an idea in the girl's mind...

A timely one, too. When Mustang emerged from the feed store into murky daylight, Truant Officer Griffin stood in the center of the unplowed street, flanked by a dozen FBI agents, appropriately identified by large white letters emblazoned on their bullet-proof vests.

Ben Espinoza, who Mustang would've gladly sent back to Loch Ness in Scotland, released the safety on his shotgun first.

"Why can't you leave me alone?" she shrieked.

Fifty yards north, the pavement cracked and lurched, and a shaft of natural gas hissed skyward. Unfortunately, at that same exact moment, a pedestrian flicked his lit cigarette butt on the sidewalk.

The explosion rocked every structure in a six-block radius.

II

To say the least, this distraction caused the agents to forget Mustang Duryea. As cell phones summoned ambulances and fire engines, she blended with the crowd invariably attracted to such disasters.

Joe had driven his vehicle to the loading dock, and pulled from the alley as chunks of asphalt shot in all directions, landing on cars and light posts in molten blobs. His daughter sprinted to where he'd shoved open the passenger door. She leapt onto the seat and held the panic bar as they narrowly avoided a collision with an oncoming police cruiser.

“I told Frankie another pipe would break before spring,” snarled the balding rancher. “You need anything else while we’re in town?”

“No, Dad.”

Suddenly, Griffin ascended a snow mound rising from the curb, wielding a pitch fork. Mustang yelped, and Joe yanked the wheel left, plowing into a parked Dodge Ram 1500.

“Son of a bitch!” the elder Duryea bellowed.

Mustang scrambled from the Suburban, intent on reprimanding Griffin for his foolishness. Thin lips curved in a tenuous grin. “We had an appointment at the coffee shop, Lizzie.”

“That was before... before...”

“You blew up the road?”

She ignored the question. “What’s with the pitchfork?”

“I bought it at the feed store.”

“Bullshit. When Frankie rings up sales of potentially dangerous tools, he always wraps them in thick brown paper, tied with twine. You didn’t buy it; you stole it.”

“Requisitioned for government use,” Griffin scoffed.

“Use on what, a truant hay bale?”

Joe had moved the Suburban from the accident site, assessed minor dents in the front quarter panel, and exchanged insurance details with the pickup’s owner. “C’mon, girl!”

Griffin seized Mustang’s arm, preventing her from obeying. “He never calls you by name. Why?”

“It doesn’t matter. Which reminds me: what’s yours?”

“Griffin.”

“I mean, your first name.”

“Why?”

“Curiosity.”

“Jude. Jude Andrew Griffin.”

“Well, Jude Griffin: if you call me Lizzie again, more than just the street will explode.”

His digits retracted, shocked by the electrical charge she emitted. “How, then, shall I address you?”

“I’m Mustang to most.”

“Well, Mustang, when can we talk as two mature individuals?”

“It’s the ranch hands’ night out. Meet me at the bunkhouse around 7:00.”

“No tricks?”

“No promises.”

She hoisted herself into the idling Suburban, and Joe slammed the transmission into four-wheel drive.

The journey home passed in silence. Staring at miles of six-foot drifts and spindly, bare branches, Mustang pondered the image of Jude Griffin atop the snow, pitchfork ominously poised heavenward. Add two horns and a forked tail, and he might've been Mephistopheles himself - or, at any rate, popular sketches of same.

After another strained dinner with her parents, Mustang sneaked out the kitchen door after Maggie finished the dishes and joined Joe in the living room to watch an inane sitcom. She slipped bare feet into leather boots on the back porch, zipped her parka over her flannel shirt and jeans, and tied the fur-trimmed hood while she hiked the gravel drive to the bunkhouse.

“You're late,” scolded Griffin, shrouded by shadows near the unlocked entrance.

“You in a hurry?”

“No, just unbelievably cold.”

Mustang let the official, attired in brown turtleneck and Dockers, precede her into the common space where the Duryea employees ate and played poker at home-made oak picnic tables. She heard him stumble over a bench before she switched on an overhead light fixture.

“Want some hot cocoa?” she offered.

“No, thanks.”

Throwing a log into the wood stove, she sank in a gaudy plaid, ripped armchair. “What's your game, Jude Griffin?”

“What makes you think...”

“The pitchfork,” she replied. “I've sensed something not right about you since you showed up yesterday.”

“Are you unaware the local constabulary owns a dozen magnificent bay mares - bought from your own stock, I understand? They needed the pitchfork to move hay into the barn where they are housed.”

“Bullshit. Canyon Creek's town council voted to sell the horses last year, an unnecessary expense used only for three annual holiday parades.”

Hovering above her, the left edge of his mouth twitched upward. “Caught again. You're very... astute for someone who avoids school like the plague.”

“None of the classes on my schedule teach anything about recognizing entities from the nether world.”

His laugh - a tenor chortle which reverberated eerily around the paneled chamber - unnerved the auburn-haired teen for the briefest second. She knew, if

she didn't maintain tight control, this situation could quickly escalate into a major debacle.

"You honestly think your little... tricks can defeat me?" scoffed Griffin.

"I think your presence makes no damned sense."

"No?" He squatted beside the chair, brown orbs level with her hazel eyes.

"You've not the slightest notion how Jack Parsons acquired the power you now possess?"

"My grandmother told me..."

"A whore of Babylon!"

"We won't go into that. Why present yourself in the guise of a truant officer, when it would've been simpler..."

"To manifest in a blaze of fire at the foot of your bed one starry night, demanding my due?"

"You're sure wasting a lot of time doing it this way."

Griffin sank on his boot heels. "I'd hoped to convince you to... relinquish your power voluntarily, without revealing my... true nature."

"Not gonna happen, dude."

"Then, I shall take it by force."

"Not without a hell of a fight."

Dejected, he shifted toward the warmth of the cast iron stove. "I know."

"Give it up, and take off," Mustang suggested.

"Failure is not an option. Parsons... tapped Legion in his rituals. In essence, he stole their command of nature and nullified any opportunity to supercede his dictates. If he'd not passed his ill-gotten treasure to you during that bizarre suicide rite at Boleskine, we would've reclaimed it for our own..."

"Sounds like another concocted tale to me." Though the girl flippantly spoke the words, she grasped a truth in Griffin's narrative. "From what I've read in Parsons' journals, the only way I can be shed of this power is to die..."

"Unless..."

Mustang echoed, "Unless? You gonna go all red-eye and suck it out of me?"

"Nothing so Hollywood."

"Thanks for that, at least."

Rising to his full, albeit limited, height, Griffin raged, "How can you be so callous about this? Has it not disrupted your every waking hour, caused you to live in fear of what might transpire next?"

"Sure. It's also been a means for me to learn to think before I speak, and to choose those words with extreme care."

That vibrato returned to his voice. “Oh, you have no idea, child! If you refuse me, your short existence on this planet will be fraught with death, terror and infamy.”

“Pretty much the fate I’d imagined for myself.”

“Fool!” He reached for her; she successfully dodged his grip. “I can grant you whatever your heart desires...”

“Already have it.”

“Give me the power!” Backlit by a full moon shimmering through glass panes, Griffin appeared quite spectral as the walls shook from his amplified howl.

Mustang tired of the fracas. “Be gone, for cryin’ out loud!”

As if a lightning bolt had shot from her torso into his, Griffin dissolved in a puff of reddish smoke. The teen rose, brushing dust from her jeans, chuckling at the scene’s idiocy. She stretched her limbs and spun toward the door, unexpectedly encircled by vice-like arms.

Griffin had not vanished, merely moved to a more advantageous location. He’d caught her off guard, and she regretted her overconfidence.

“I don’t want to hurt you, Mustang,” he whispered. “The whole process can be quite... pleasant, if you’ll trust me.”

Foregoing a struggle to assuage Griffin’s temper, she nonetheless proclaimed, “I trust you about as much as my dad does a used car salesman.”

The sound of tires on the drive, and headlights piercing the rustic blinds, announced the arrival of the ranch hands from their evening excursion. Griffin recoiled, bidding Mustang a hasty farewell by scooping her right palm to his mouth. He brushed the scar with his lips, scorching the flesh anew, and not a temporary anguish as when she’d spontaneously traveled from Scotland. The sensation lingered, and she didn’t like it.

“You’re no match for me, child. If you don’t surrender now, you’ll go through absolute hell until you beg me to relieve you of your power.”

“Bullshit!” Mustang vowed. A microburst of freezing wind cooled her hand and propelled Griffin from the bunkhouse into the night.

Tony and Steve, members of the skeleton crew which staffed the ranch during these months, glanced quizzically at their boss’ daughter as they stomped their boots on the threshold. She scurried past them and sprinted to the house, where the lights had been extinguished.

A word to nature unlocked the kitchen door, but contacting the knob caused her to flinch in agony. She would spend the remainder of the weekend devising a way to outwit Mephistopheles, without sacrificing her power, or her self.

And, she knew it wouldn’t be easy.

She couldn't confide in her parents and, last she'd heard, her cousin Rachel and Peter O'Donnell had returned to Ireland. Her auburn tresses the sole reason classmates recognized her when she *did* attend Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High, she counted no friends among them. Jack Parsons, the source of her trouble, had left only his journals.

The bedside clock read 3:07 AM when she shot off the mattress and rushed to the closet. Hand-written volumes had been stuffed in a secret compartment she'd created between the studs, for fear of the FBI. She anxiously scanned cramped script illuminated by a goose-neck desk lamp for mention of infernal beings.

Ready to abandon the effort, a seeming doodle in the page margin toward the end of the third book captured her attention. A thick circle, with the letter "M" in the center, and two curved horns drawn at approximately 2 and 10 - had the circumference been a watch face - bore the caption, "Satan's brand."

Examining her pulsating hand, she saw this exact imprint mingled with the scar tissue.

"Oh, hell..." she muttered.

The sentences scribbled to the left of the sketch described Mephistopheles in much the same physical guise as Jude Griffin: slight physique, bronze hair, sharpish features, high forehead and brown eyes. This innocuous visitor to the Boleskine House estate in 1965 had accepted a glass of whiskey before the Gate Lodge's crackling fireplace, prior to revealing his actual purpose.

"Man can only subdue these through sheer force of will," Parsons had written. "Woman, however, has the capacity to seduce the nefarious schemer with purity and innocence, if pure she be - and should she feign these qualities, woe to her! When the dark spirit voluntarily succumbs to what may be deemed love, he will be consumed by Satan's own relentless fire, ne'er to trouble humankind again. Let her beware physical contact with the demon, lest she be dragged into the fiery pit with him."

Damned improbable, Mustang sniffed. Though she'd been kissed just once, by drunken actor Thomas Burton, she might be considered pure in that regard. Her encounter with Parsons - killing him, albeit unwittingly - the childlike wonder she'd so cherished had faded as her innocence soured into cynicism.

Seducing any male, for that matter, would be impossible, since she despised dresses, make-up, and the typical techniques used by females to entice the opposite sex.

Old movies, however, which she enjoyed above other forms of entertainment, could be referenced for instances where a woman's intellect and

independence proved attractive. While Mustang's high school grades didn't accurately reflect her intelligence, having been frequently absent, her independent attitude could not be denied.

Crawling beneath a horse-themed quilt, the teen fell asleep practicing apologies to Jude Griffin for her rudeness.

Maggie and Joe Duryea drove to Canyon Creek for church services Sunday morning, leaving Mustang and the ranch hands to ride the circuit of water troughs, breaking ice and replenishing the hay.

The girl vigorously brushed Heartbeat in the barn when Griffin appeared, a shadow outlined by chill sunlight pouring through the door.

"I didn't hear you coming," she muttered.

The lean figure admitted, "Now you know my origins, I've no need to pretend."

She didn't respond.

"You don't observe the Sabbath, like your parents?"

"There is no day of rest when animals need to be fed and watered. Besides, what I remember from my comparative religion class, the Sabbath is a subjective notion. Whether a given sect chooses Friday, Saturday or Sunday as their holy day, they completely miss the point."

"A shrewd observation." Griffin - wearing a black turtleneck and slacks without coat, hat or gloves - settled on a warped wooden bench. "How does one so young acquire such wisdom?"

"By enduring hell."

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed the bronzed head flinch.

"And, in this hell of my own creation, I tend to let my anger flare without cause," she continued. "I'm... sorry about my behavior last night."

"At least, you didn't cower in fear, like so many. It repulses me when they drop to their knees and beg for mercy."

"A virtue unfamiliar to you?"

"Exactly."

Mustang placed the brushes on a shelf, and reached to carry the saddle to the tack room. Gallantly, Griffin intercepted her, and lifted the weighty tooled leather himself. She signaled him to drape it over an empty stand against the far wall.

"Thank you," she said, as they emerged to layers of snow sparkling in the sun. "I... want you to know..."

When she halted, he paused and favored her with those fierce brown eyes. "Yes?"

“If I could give you my power, I would... gladly. I... despise what it’s done to me, how it’s altered my life. It’s a daily torture, worse than any you could devise, I’m sure. I... don’t relish the idea of dying, though, and that’s the sole way I can be shed of it. And, if I recall correctly, you can’t kill me.”

“You are correct in that. I *can* make you miserable beyond your limited comprehension, with everything from boils to... well, no need to turn your stomach on such a gorgeous day. You would want to die, but would have to perform the deed with your own hand.”

“Which I don’t intend to do.”

“Despite the fact your life will be... an endless array of agonizing challenges?”

She averted her gaze, deliberately adding a hint of angst to her contralto.
“Yes.”

“Valiant child. Most prefer the quick and easy solution.”

“Which is how you... make your living?”

“If you wish to describe it so.” He stood behind her right shoulder, almost whispering in her ear.

“What’s it like in... hell?”

“Not how sanctimonious preachers present it to their God-fearing congregations. The torment is self-generated by the damned, a fire without flames or substance, which scorches from the inside out, if you will. Nor is it one specific location, with the entire populace housed on various levels, as Danté wrote. An individual can spend his or her hellish eternity within sight of a much loved house, children or flowers, unable to again take part in beloved celebrations or experience joy.”

“That... is what I thought,” Mustang grieved. “At least, I have these horses, and the beauty of these acres, a respite from my personal hell.”

“Cherish them while you may,” admonished Griffin.

When she turned, he’d vanished. Satisfied the entry in Jack Parsons’ journal might be accurate, she trekked to the kitchen door, hungry for breakfast.

III

Usually, Joe Duryea’s Chevy Suburban crunched gravel and slush beneath its tires long before 1:00 PM. Mustang assumed, by the prolonged absence, her parents had joined friends for a late brunch after services, or found other reasons to stay in town.

Or, as Jude Griffin materialized beside her on the worn living room sofa, had he created a delay so they might confer without interference?

“Why the rush?” the teen queried, taking a poker to smoldering logs on the fireplace grate.

“Like journalists and mail carriers, we have deadlines to meet.”

“And yours is...”

“Midnight.”

“Which explains the truant officer gag. Tomorrow, I’d be on the bus to school, and you wouldn’t have to press matters.”

Griffin nodded.

“Any idea how to resolve this to our mutual advantage?”

“Frankly, no.”

In a mocking tone, Mustang quipped, “The master of deception at a loss on ways to dupe his prey?”

Her guest bristled. “Our standard approach would be to offer you something in exchange...”

“But this isn’t the standard situation, is it?”

“No.”

“And even if you secured my signature on a contract, selling my soul to you for whatever we agreed upon, you still wouldn’t get the power until I died, at some point in the far distant future.”

Clearing his throat, Griffin countered, “The not so distant future.”

“Eh?” Mustang prodded.

“Once the contract is signed, accidents... happen.”

“In other words, you welsh on the deal?”

“Not at all! Say, you wanted peace on earth. We could arrange a global cease-fire for 24 hours, and our part of the bargain would be fulfilled, and you’d be subject to... shall we say, immediate collection of your debt.”

“What about a lasting peace: three centuries’ worth?”

“You’d want to stick around for the duration?”

“Not me, personally, just hypothetically.”

“That... would require approval from my superior.”

Mustang chuckled. “The present scenario, however, is the reverse. I possess something you want, so it’s for me to quote terms.”

“Pretty much.” Griffin exhaled slowly, studying the flames.

“You’re... reluctant to go through with this. Why?”

“Because, you’re a bright young woman, and have great potential.”

“Thanks.”

“For good, or evil.”

“Evil?” she repeated.

“You could destroy humanity with a random phrase...”

“I... think I figured that out.”

“Can you estimate how the population of hell would increase, if you did? If the most corrupt inhabitants of the planet had no prospect to make amends for their sins, and died in an instant...”

“Ah, I see. You’re calculating the risk of enlisting me as an ally.”

Griffin grinned, softening his features dramatically. “Smart as a whip, you are.”

“The gamble you’d take, letting me keep this power: I’d change my mind, and use it for the advantage of the species.”

“As Peter O’Donnell advised.”

“A... tough recommendation.”

“To be sure, even for those with maturity and wisdom.”

“And, I definitely lack maturity.”

“At 17, who doesn’t?”

“If I refuse your... kind offer, what then?” she asked.

“I’ve been debating that, unsuccessfully.”

“So, you just dropped by to chat?”

“I... want to get a feel for your philosophy of life, your personality, your politics.”

“At 17, I really don’t...”

“You’re an unusual 17. Our records show you’ve never enjoyed school or studies, except subjects in which you were interested - horses, old movies... Long before you acquired this command over nature, you had an affinity with the outdoors. You understand what most humans ignore.”

“Which causes issues for you?”

Rather than reply, Jude Griffin disappeared in a stray flame, which penetrated and singed the mesh screen.

Mustang stretched out on the sofa and chortled, “Chicken.”

Cigarette dangling from his mouth, Tony burst through the front door a second later. “Where’s your dad?” he inquired, flustered.

“Not home yet. What’s up?”

“Eight horses caught in a sink hole, at the far end of the north pasture.”

The girl’s hazel eyes rolled. “He would have to play dirty.”

“What?” puzzled Tony.

“Nothing.” Mustang grabbed her parka off the wall rack and followed the ranch hand out the door.

Tony, burly even without a heavy coat, drove the snow mobile while his passenger held on for dear life. “I’ve never seen anything like this,” he confessed against biting winds. “At least, not in the dead of winter.”

Though frozen, a 30-foot diameter section of ground had given way, dropping the animals 15 feet onto solid rock. From their positions, Mustang could tell half would need to be put out of their misery. The others would not escape without aid of a crane and specialized equipment.

Three other hands stood on the edge, at a loss.

“If Joe was here...” Steve ventured.

Mustang snarled, “He’d shoot them and be done with it, rather than go through the expense.” Glancing around, she spat a curse. “You guys, get lost.”

“What...” Tony stammered.

“I’ll... do what needs to be done.”

Steve pulled a pistol from inside his jacket and laid it on her open palm. The brand twinged, and she grit her teeth.

“You okay?” he asked.

“I will be.”

Snow mobiles out of earshot, Mustang gazed down at the magnificent, wounded creatures. “Reshape the ground to create a ramp, which the horses can climb,” she instructed the natural elements. “And heal their wounds.”

Beneath her feet, the snow pack shifted. Layers of dirt twisted to form a gentle ascent around the perimeter of the depression. While the horses recovered their wits, standing securely on all fours, they would not move.

Mustang edged her way along the slick surface, joining them and soothing jangled nerves with gentle strokes of their noses and manes. She didn’t consider, if Jude Griffin claimed responsibility for the event, he might close the hole over her, causing not only her demise, but the animals’, as well.

One by one, she led the mares onto the level plain. The eight freed, another command restored the pasture to its previous condition.

Hiking to the nearest water trough, Mustang used a metal pole to break the ice, and watched the horses drink their fill. She slogged toward the house, grateful when Tony sped along the path.

“Done?” he hinted.

“They’re fine. Just shaken up.”

The bearded young man peered at her, then yanked her aboard. He dropped her at the bunkhouse, in time to meet her parents' Suburban rolling up the drive.

Maggie, evidently, convinced Joe after church to escort her to an antique show in Helena, where she purchased a number of furnishings and bric-a-brac. By the time her acquisitions were unloaded, the dinner hour had long passed, so the Duryeas warmed leftovers in the oven, eating without conversation.

Paper plates collected and consigned to a trash bin under the sink, Maggie proceeded to tour the house and decide where she wished the small, carved tables placed. Moved from position to position, nothing pleased her.

Joe stacked them in the corner near the television, until she made up her mind.

The remainder of the evening, the woman arranged figurines in the china cupboard, retreating periodically to admire the items, before swapping their places.

Mustang retired to her room, revolted.

Glancing at her clock, she realized Jude Griffin would miss his deadline in less than four hours. She reclined on her pillows, staring at the white ceiling. She tried to imagine what her life would be like if she hadn't gone east to stay with her maternal grandmother, if that woman hadn't died, providing her a passport and airline ticket to Scotland. Had she not encountered Jack Parsons, would she be content with the "normal" daily routine of horses, school and awkward parental relations?

"Ol' Jack screwed me royal thirty years ago," stated Griffin, emerging from Mustang's closet, perusing volume one of Parsons' journals. "I'll tell you, my punishment for botching that assignment... words aren't sufficient to convey the extent of my agony."

Relieved to see him not holding the book in which Parsons had scrawled his knowledge of hell's minions, the teen propped herself on her left elbow. "No one likes to fail..."

"Humans learn from failure. I... don't seem to have learned how to convince you to surrender yourself..." He snapped the book closed, and settled on the foot of the bed. "I'm accustomed to cut-and-dried deals. You express a dream, a goal; I promise fulfillment of same. The contract signed, the rest becomes the responsibility of the... collectors."

"Perfectly feasible arrangement."

"Except in this situation."

"I'm really sorry... It sounds like your superiors sent someone from the wrong department."

“Were I to show you our organizational chart, you’d discover I’m second in command of the whole operation.”

“The best but one, eh?”

Griffin smirked.

“If it’s any consolation, I don’t think the top dog could’ve handled this... mess.”

“I concur. That doesn’t give me an excuse to face him empty handed.”

Sitting upright, Mustang hugged her legs to her chest. “Couldn’t you... lie? The power is intangible, not something you can stuff in a box and deliver like a birthday gift.”

“He’ll know, because success means Legion will be able to resume their reign over the lesser realms...”

“Quite a dilemma.”

“Indeed,” groaned Griffin.

“You can’t run...”

“Nor hide.”

“That’s the trouble with being...”

“Me.”

Mustang remained silent, contemplating Griffin’s somber countenance. Abruptly, she remembered no light burned in the chamber. She reached for the goose-necked lamp on the night stand, but her companion hissed, “Don’t.”

“Why?”

“Basking in the glow of your soul is the one comfort I’ve had these many aeons.”

She gulped self-consciously. “It’s the full moon.”

“No, it’s you. That’s why...”

“Oh, be rational,” she interrupted.

His jaw dropped; he said nothing.

“You were sent to retrieve the power Jack Parsons stole from Legion, which he bequeathed to me.”

Reluctantly, Griffin acknowledged, “Check.”

“I can’t surrender it without dying.”

“Check.”

“And you can’t kill me outright.”

“Check.”

“If you could sway me to your cause, thereby controlling the power indirectly...”

“I... don’t know...”

“What other options are there?”

Griffin demanded, “Why are you doing this?”

“You must’ve figured it out by now: I only bring harm through my lack of self-control. Otherwise, I prefer to wish others well and let them go their way.”

“And, your plan is to preserve you own life while saving me from... eternal retribution?”

“Something like that.”

“Which is why you shine so brightly, a beacon of hope for this weary world.”

“Stop!” she croaked, burying wet cheeks behind her knees.

“Why? Even the evil ones recognize unwavering goodness when we see it. It’s not a matter of laying temptation before such as those; they are genuinely untouchable, brimming over with peace.”

“I... am not what you describe. My heart brims with hatred for the shallow people who populate this planet, and it would be very, very easy for me to utter the decree for their destruction...”

“Why, then, don’t you?” Griffin wondered.

“Because, I don’t want this power!” shrieked Mustang, leaping off the mattress. “It’s like a plague, or inoperable cancer. I can’t simply brush it off like a mosquito and be done!”

Soft tapping on the door preempted the tirade. “Hon, are you okay?” Maggie asked without turning the knob.

“Fine, Mom,” the girl bluffed. “Just... watching an old movie.”

“Not one of those bloody horror movies, I hope. You’ve got school tomorrow, and you need your rest.”

“No, Mom. Nothing like that.”

“Good night.”

Footsteps along the hall faded before Mustang glared at Jude Griffin. “We’re both in a bind. What do we do?”

“Search me.”

IV

Until midnight: 87 minutes. At an impasse, Mustang crossed to the window, thick green draperies drawn back with cloth ties.

“It’s a gorgeous night,” she commented, relishing the triumph to come. “Have you ever played snowball tag?”

Griffin guffawed heartily. "Haven't you ever heard the phrase, 'A snowball's chance in hell?'" The white stuff doesn't last long where I'm from."

The lower pane slid upward. "C'mon, then."

"We'll freeze!"

"Grab a couple coats from the closet."

Fetching Mustang's parka and a sheep-skin lined jean jacket - which fit him due to his diminutive stature - the pair crawled over the sill into star-filled stillness.

"Won't your parents hear, and investigate?" murmured Griffin.

"Their bedroom is at the back. Noise doesn't carry from the clearing past the barn."

Mustang got off the first shot when the phony truant officer stepped from among spectral, bare trees. "Tag! You're 'It'!"

He shivered as slush dripped down his collar, soaking his turtleneck. "Why, you..." Bending to pack wet substance into a ball, another projectile hit him squarely in the backside. He bolted upright. "Hey! I thought we alternated..."

"Depends on who makes the rules!" Mustang, giggling, bombarded him with three snowballs simultaneously.

Griffin failed to dodge or duck, hit in the face, leg and ear. Without a chance to mount his own offensive, he instead rushed his opponent, knocking her into a sizeable drift. Her loose, auburn mane spattered with white, she swiped her arm through the pack, sending a cloud of fluff in his direction.

"Missed me!" he taunted. The second wave doused him, head to toe. "Vixen!"

The game morphed into a chase through deep snow, into the trees for hide-and-seek. Not difficult to locate each other, laughing uncontrollably.

A brisk wind rustled the branches, the precursor of heavy precipitation. By the time the pair tired of their antics, huge flakes had begun falling. They sat on a stump, watching their boot prints gradually eradicated.

"I'm soaked through," lamented Mustang, squeezing liquid from her near-frozen hair.

A twinge of concern in Griffin's accented tenor comforted her. "You need a hot shower and a good night's sleep, to prevent illness."

"What about you? You're positively dripping!"

"I... haven't humanity's worries in that regard."

"You sound like you *want* to be human."

"I envy your kind not one iota," he swore.

She rose. "Good for you."

Leading him toward the house, she instinctively held out her hand. Whether distracted from his duty, or succumbing to this novel seduction, he entwined her fingers with his own, allowing her to guide him through increasing gloom.

Giving her a boost over the window sill, he hoisted himself inside and secured the glass. Mustang slung her parka over the desk chair and crept from her room to the bathroom, retrieving two large towels. She tugged one around her trembling torso; Griffin held his, unsure of its use.

“Oh, that’s right,” stuttered the girl, teeth chattering with cold.

He dropped the folded terrycloth on the floor, and moved to rub her shoulders in an effort to create friction and warmth. So deep her chill, her shudders grew more pronounced, until he spun her around and wrapped his arms around her.

“Better?” he posited.

“It will be... in a minute... or two.”

He continued massaging, her face cradled against his neck. Suddenly, his arms locked, and he hissed an oath. “You will be the end of me, I fear.”

“How so?”

Their eyes met, and she glimpsed a single tear stream along his straight nose before he covered her mouth with scalding lips.

Quite different, this kiss, from that she shared with Thomas Burton after her cousin’s funeral in Idaho. That night, the floor had lurched, the dwelling’s collapse imminent. Here, a profound hush engulfed them - the universe holding its breath in anticipation of a pending cataclysm.

Griffin’s opportunity to feel totally human, he wished to relish every second.

Would the embrace signal the finalization of the deal he’d been sent to engineer, Mustang mused, herself consumed by unfamiliar sensations. She would be rid of the power...

A crack of thunder, rather than drive them apart, caused them to cling more tightly to each other. Breathless, they gazed into the night.

“So much for my deadline,” mumbled Griffin.

“If you stand with me, Jude...”

The bronze head shook plaintively. “No, my dear. I’ll not sacrifice you on the altar of my failure.”

“Tell me, fast, how Jack Parsons defeated you thirty years ago.”

“Why...”

“Tell me!”

“He tricked me. Took me to Loch Ness and challenged me to a contest.”

“Contest?”

“To see who could raise Nessie quicker.”

Mention of the mythical Scottish monster raised a lump in Mustang’s throat. “Go on.”

“I allowed him the first turn, so I could draw on his technique. He raised a violent storm, seeming not to notice a boat of school children being ferried across the water. The thought of those innocents plunging to their deaths... I ordered him to stop.”

“An... act of kindness?”

“We of the nether regions aren’t known for...”

A basso profundo rumbled an interruption, vibrating the walls. “All hail Mephistopheles!”

Mustang groaned, “That’ll wake my parents, for sure.”

“Only we can hear him,” Griffin assured her.

She exhaled, relieved.

What manifested before them would’ve cause the elder Duryeas heart attacks. Mustang gaped at the hideous visage of the devil himself: a scaly type of flesh covering asymmetrical features lacking a nose or ears. He stood clumsily on gnarled feet - not hooves, as in many depictions - supporting himself with a petrified wood walking stick.

“Your failure is most disconcerting,” came from the skewed mouth, along with a copious amount of drool.

“Is that...” Mustang mumbled.

“He’s looked better,” admitted her companion. “The greater the punishment, the worse his physical appearance.”

“Report!” the demon howled. “Or, rather, no need for your report. I can see your results.”

Griffin came close to groveling. “Sir, I...”

“No excuses, fool!” What might’ve passed for a hand - a clawed appendage at the end of a malformed limb - raised toward the subordinate.

Mustang stepped between them, her right palm exposed in a “Stop” gesture. “Hold on, buddy!”

Bulbous orbs squinted at the scar, with the raised “M” brand clearly visible. “So... you did succeed.”

“I...” Griffin stammered, grasping her arm and forcing it to her side. “I did not!”

“She bears my mark!”

“An accident.”

“Accident?” yowled the creature. “In our line of work, nothing is accidental...”

“I... miscalculated her determination.”

“You were blinded by her virtue, fool!”

Mustang clucked, “Virtue? Me?”

“Even now, the light radiates from her,” spat the spectre. “Rather than remain detached and take whatever drastic action necessary, you played on her weaknesses...”

“Sir,” Griffin interspersed, “she played on mine.” His brown eyes tenderly scanned her youthful face. “And won.”

A stream of flame emitted from the claws would have consumed Griffin, had not Mustang again intervened. Hell’s second-in-command attempted to shove her aside, but she held her ground and yelled, “Ice!”

Blocks of frozen water converged to divide the room, preventing heat from reaching the couple. The dense barricade melted into sizzling steam, but served its purpose: discouraging the satanic entity from such dramatic spectacles.

“You protect this underling,” he gurgled. “Why?”

“I don’t like bullies, in any form,” she retorted.

Disgusted, he whirled toward the window. “I shall have what is rightfully mine!”

“Go ahead. Try to take it. But leave Jude out of it.”

“Mustang, no!” warned Griffin.

She brushed off his grasp. “Don’t worry. He can’t touch me.”

“Don’t underestimate his ingenuity.”

The superior devil oozed, “If Jude could not succeed, I suppose I will fail, too.”

“You won’t just fail. You’ll be subjected to the very horrors you’ve inflicted on millions of damned souls since time began.”

Lunging toward her, he bellowed, “You threaten me, pitiful insect?”

“Oh, go back where you came from.”

The explosion which followed rocked the house off its foundation. Griffin clutched Mustang, dropped to the floor with her, and pulled the bed quilt atop them, shielding them from crumbling plaster. When the turmoil ceased, they waited a full five minutes before rising.

“Is he gone?” Mustang puzzled.

“Gone, but not happy.”

“Oh, hell...”

The ironic timing of this utterance alleviated their distress, and the laughter broke forth. Griffin pecked Mustang on the forehead, and caressed her cheek.

She assessed the damage. "What a disaster!"

He postulated, "You can fix it easily. I have faith in you."

"Thanks."

"The reason he wanted the power back: it made you his equal. He has... ego issues..."

"What'll happen to you?"

Griffin shrugged. "Knowing him from our long, long association, he'll think the worst he can do is make me fully human, to grow old and die, supposedly bored out of my skull. He couldn't guess I'd really enjoy it."

Their discussion interrupted by pounding on the bedroom door, Mustang's eyes widened.

"Girl, are you alive?" shouted her father.

"Sure, Dad."

Sheepishly, she grinned at Griffin.

"The frame is twisted. I can't open the door," persisted Joe.

"Don't worry, Dad. You're having a bad dream."

"A dream? What the devil..."

"Exactly!" Griffin chortled.

Mustang swallowed her giggle, and listened as the elder Duryea navigated through debris to the master suite. Then, she bade nature refurbish the house.

Griffin stood in awe of the feat. "I've... never tried that."

"Your forte is destruction, I'd guess."

"No more." He moved toward her; she retreated. "What's wrong?"

"Your work is done here, wouldn't you say?"

"My work?" he echoed. "You make it sound like my shift is over, I can punch out and go home."

"Well, won't you?"

"No. Not now. Not after..."

"Jude, you've been... deceived."

"Deceived?"

"First, by Jack Parsons. Then, by me."

Griffin's sharpish features grew sharper. "You?"

"Parsons wrote in his journals how to defeat you, and I adapted his advice..."

"You didn't trick me..." He recovered his composure, brown eyes glaring dangerously. "Or, did you?"

Mustang's nose twitched.

"Oh, you!" he growled, his tenor dropping to a baritone range. "You are a master of deceit, and I - who should have recognized the ploy - fell hook, line and sinker for the innocence and beauty routine. Had I an ounce of integrity left..."

"What would you do?"

Griffin had no chance to answer. Swirls of cloying mist penetrated the closed window, and snaked across the floor toward the pair.

"Mustang, stop it!"

"I can't stop it, if I don't know what it is."

Dropping to his knees, he seized her forearms. "It's... my retribution!"

She recalled Jack Parsons' entry in his third journal, "Let her beware physical contact with the demon, lest she be dragged into the fiery pit with him," and extricated herself from his grasp. The creeping fog coiled around Griffin's legs, moving upward until it encased his entire body. As he opened his mouth to scream, the hardening mass sealed around his head.

The girl scrambled onto her mattress, pressing herself against the headboard as the undefinable material cracked and warped. In a puff of smoke, the mass disintegrated, leaving a powder residue near the television stand.

"Oh, hell..."

Jude Griffin's superior, Mustang supposed, had exacted his vengeance. He had reduced the phony truant officer and blundering demon to oblivion, from what she could deduce.

That loss of life - if life it could be designated - rested squarely on her shoulders. Had she not played on his shortcomings, as he'd hoped to play on hers, he might have salvaged his reputation as Satan's deputy, and continued corralling souls to perdition for millennia to come.

"What am I thinking?" the teen declared. One less purveyor of evil in the world would be a blessing, by any stretch of the imagination.

Plucking her quilt from the floor, she nestled on the bed, unable to sleep and fully expecting ceiling plaster to crash upon her.

Monday morning, Maggie tapped on the door, opening it a crack. "You awake, hon?"

Not really, her daughter ached to answer. "Yeah, Mom."

"School bus will be here in twenty minutes."

"Yeah, Mom."

A hasty shower preceded jerking on a blue hooded sweatshirt and jeans. She drank the orange juice waiting on the kitchen table without sitting, listening

absently to her father prattle on about a crazed nightmare in which the house had been destroyed by a tornado.

“I had the same dream,” commented Maggie, pulling a roast from the freezer to thaw for dinner.

Resisting the urge to reveal her secret, Mustang pulled on her parka - damp from the snow ball fight - and stuffed her feet into worn boots. She'd not attended Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High enough days to have any books to fill a backpack, so she waved her leather gloves at her parents and trudged into the feeble winter light.

Glancing back once, twice, neither of the Duryeas came to the picture window to observe their offspring traverse the gravel drive to the bus stop. Instead, she diverted to the barn, saddling Heartbeat and riding out to break ice off the water troughs in the south pastures.

No real truant officer would have risked his neck to tramp into the fields through two feet of snow. She should have seen through Jude Griffin from the start. She still trusted human beings too much, took them at face value, when they had ulterior motives involving unorthodox use of her power.

She had a lot to learn, and Griffin had given her a harsh lesson, just as Wilfrid Bailey had done weeks earlier. Griffin had prophesied her future as “an endless array of agonizing challenges,” adding, “Your short existence on this planet will be fraught with death, terror and infamy.” Not a pleasant fate.

Stroking her pinto's mane, she studied thickening clouds on the western horizon. More snow would fall by afternoon. Already feeling a chill, she decided to take shelter in the barn, turn on the electric heater in the tack room, and spend the day cleaning her father's collection of saddles.

No one would find her there. She wished no one would care to find her, ever again.

An unrealistic scenario, but it comforted her a little.

Catching the dangling reins, she glanced at her scarred palms. From her right, the brand imprinted there had vanished.

Death, terror and infamy. At least, she could deal with humanity on her own terms.