

The Mustang Chronicles:

Shocking Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

Elizabeth “Mustang” Duryea could not deny the truth: avoiding pure hatred of some people proved quite a challenge for her. The amount of stupidity and plain ignorance existing in the world merited such hatred, especially when innocents died as a result of wholesale warfare.

Still, that particular emotion defeated her incessant attempts to use the power she’d accidentally inherited from occultist and scientist Jack Parsons - during a bizarre ritual at Boleskine House on the east shore of Loch Ness in the Scottish Highlands - in positive ways.

She could get angry - very angry - and do horrible things as a result, compelled after such an impulsive declaration to clean up the mess. That’s why she’d stopped attending Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High: her fellow students annoyed her, and she didn’t wish to bring the roof down on their heads.

Try as she might to maintain a semblance of tolerance, one specific instance that winter sparked a hatred in her soul that could not be quashed.

Joe Duryea’s announcement at dinner - reading the day’s mail between bites of pork chop and mashed potatoes smothered in gravy - that his uncle would arrive on Saturday for an extended stay did not excite Mustang in the least. While occasionally referenced, this Oliver Duryea never attended family gatherings, nor weddings, funerals nor reunions.

Odd, given his status of ordained minister.

Mustang once overheard Maggie, her mother, whispering with some of the more... opinionated relatives at the marriage service for a distant cousin. A consensus that Oliver spouting his radical views from the pulpit had spoiled the atmosphere of numerous celebrations and memorials in the past rated him a collective ban from all future invitations.

“Why’s he coming here?” asked the teen as she stacked the plates.

Joe, who mostly ignored his daughter, flipped through a sale flyer.

“Answer her,” Maggie prompted delicately.

“Eh?” grumbled the horse rancher.

“Tell her why Uncle Oliver is coming.”

Reluctantly, Joe admitted, “He’s giving a revival at a church in Helena, and he wants to stay somewhere his public can’t mob him.”

That attitude smacked of supreme arrogance on the part of the elder Duryea, in the girl’s view. If he was a rock musician, or movie actor, then maybe...

“He’s bringing his assistant and a secretary,” Joe added.

Mustang puzzled, “Where will they sleep?”

“The secretary, in your room. The assistant in the guest room. Oliver in our room.”

Both females glared at him.

“What about us?” prodded Maggie.

“We’ll move to the bunk house for the duration,” replied her husband.

“The hands are out for three weeks...”

Mustang smirked as she ran water in the sink. A skeleton crew tended the horses during these cold, snowy months and, when they took off for warmer climes, riding out to the pastures, to ensure the horses’ water troughs weren’t frozen solid and plenty of hay was available, fell to her.

Another reason she skipped school: those tasks took all day.

Now, she’d have to pack up her clothes and essentials and haul them to a building that smelled of smoke and lacked any semblance of habitability.

Maggie spent the remainder of the week scrubbing floors and dusting furniture, since she didn’t like that sprawling edifice much herself.

Mustang half expected Oliver Duryea to arrive in a stretch limousine - not practical when the roads were snow-covered and slick. Equally impressive, though: a convoy of four-wheel drive black Mercedes SUVs braking on the gravel drive.

She despised the man as soon as his Armani oxfords hit the ground.

For one: his salt-and-pepper mane reminded her of Charlton Heston’s Moses in *The Ten Commandments* when he descended from Mount Horeb after seeing the burning bush. How much mousse it required to create the wind blown style, and to trim his full beard so it stuck out that precise way, framing brilliant, smoldering blue eyes, a bulbous nose and thin lips, she couldn’t estimate.

Physically, he towered over his nephew by six inches, with the bulk of a boxer shrouded by an unbuttoned cashmere overcoat. Mustang suspected he wore a corset beneath the black Savile Row three-piece suit to hold in his waistline.

His voice amounted to a bass roar, perhaps accustomed to projecting his vitriol without a microphone. A massive paw clasped Joe’s hand, nearly crushing the bones - if Mustang guessed her father’s expression correctly - and faux-kissed Maggie on both cheeks, like the Europeans.

As the hosts escorted him into the house, the layout of which he viewed in disdain, his buxom tawny-haired secretary emerged from the second vehicle, pulling the hem of her brown leather mini-skirt over a curvaceous backside, and teetering on Jimmy Choo spiked heels. From the last behemoth, a slender, solemn twenty-something appeared, directing the chauffeur to unload the luggage; he held

a black molded briefcase in kid gloves, his clothing a smaller sized version of his boss' attire.

Oliver introduced them as Sarah Gutierrez and as Beef Wellington, then corrected himself with a facetious chuckle. "We just call him that. His first name is really Ted."

"Ted Wellington," the assistant stated as he shook hands with the adults.

Mustang detected a resentful edge to the younger man's baritone. "C'mon," she directed, "I'll show you your room."

Ted followed her indoors, dogged by the overloaded driver. Maggie and Joe accompanied Oliver across the threshold; he made himself right at home, throwing his coat on the sofa and flopping onto Joe's favorite recliner.

"How 'bout some coffee, dear girl?" he hinted. "It's colder than..."

Did Mustang glimpse Maggie drop a slight curtsey? Her voice certainly quivered in awe. "Of course."

From there, things quickly went south.

The drivers, needing accommodations, moved into the west half of the bunkhouse, leaving the Duryeas little in the way of privacy. A recording crew arrived on Sunday, just before Joe and Maggie returned from services in town. That quartet of technicians intended to remain indefinitely.

Maggie found herself scrambling to feed this lot, the dining table not large enough to seat them all. Two card tables and folding chairs from the barn were set up, a situation Oliver found inadequate.

"You had prior notice of my visit," he complained as he shoveled huge portions of beef, pasta, salad and ice cream into his maw. "You should have been properly prepared."

Mustang clenched her teeth to refrain from exploding.

Neither Joe nor Maggie apologized or made excuses.

"Furthermore, there's a less than sanctified atmosphere in this house..." Oliver proclaimed.

"How so?" spouted Maggie defensively, her initial admiration already shattered.

"I sense the presence of the evil one..."

Unblinking blue orbs focused on Mustang. If he expected her to flinch, or avert her gaze, he'd be disappointed.

Yes, she knew Mephistopheles himself had materialized in her bedroom only weeks prior, chastising his minion Jude Griffin and seeking her command over the natural elements. If the residual effects of that encounter penetrated this sanctimonious preacher's awareness, a major clash of wills might be in the offing...

And Mustang knew who would emerge victorious.
If she could best the devil, she could make mincemeat of this pompous fool.

She almost choked when Sarah leaned over and patted Oliver's arm.
"Now, now, Reverend," she oozed. "Remember your blood pressure."

The elder Duryea's countenance softened; he inhaled deeply. "Thank you, dear girl. A timely reminder."

He hoisted himself off the chair and strode to the master bedroom, slamming the door.

Sarah tittered sheepishly, as she, too, retired.

That left Ted, who joined Mustang at the sink, snatching a tea towel off the rack and stuffing it in a tumbler from the drainboard.

"I'm so very sorry about that," he murmured. "He..."

"Is an ass?" the teen quipped.

"Yes, but I was going to explain that he's got a lot on his plate these days. Seven revivals in six weeks across the Pacific Northwest, not to mention taping a new season of his Sunday morning television program..."

She snarled, "Please, *don't* mention it. I really don't care."

Ted rubbed droplets off a platter. "He's a good man, basically, and we're adept at keeping his... flaws hidden from media scrutiny."

"Flaws? I got the impression guys like him acknowledge no flaws."

Furtive grey eyes glanced around at the empty expanse. Satisfied, he revealed, "He tends toward bar brawls..."

Mustang hiccupped a laugh, almost dropping the cast iron skillet she was scrubbing onto Ted's foot.

"It's not funny," he lamented. "When he downs a few, he gets really obnoxious..."

"More obnoxious than here?"

"Incredibly so. When we stay in the city, two bodyguards stick to him like glue, and yet he manages to antagonize someone who wants to knock him down a peg or two."

"Why confide in me?" queried Mustang.

"Because I have a feeling you can help me ditch this gig and find real meaning in my life."

She bristled. "I'm just a kid."

"A kid who left a stack of books on her closet floor..."

Then, Mustang realized the truth. She'd been in the process of tucking Jack Parsons' hand-written journals into the cubbyhole between studs on the back wall

of her closet, when her mother had called her for dinner Friday evening. She'd set them down and forgotten about them. "Oh, hell..."

"Sarah stumbled upon them when she was unpacking her collection of shoes and, since she's barely literate, asked me about them."

"So, my hunch she's just arm candy is on the nose?"

"You're very perceptive," Ted praised.

"And you just signed on with Uncle Oliver for the paycheck?"

"Pretty much. My father is one of Ollie's largest donors, and suggested I apply to fill the vacant post on his staff after I graduated college."

"With what degree?"

"English literature."

Mustang didn't repress her chuckle. "Useless, eh?"

"I wanted to pursue a master's or doctorate, but my dad wouldn't pony up the cash."

"He'd rather give it to a phony like my uncle."

"It's a substantial tax deduction."

Irritated, her hands squeezed liquid from the steel wool until the coarse strands ripped her flesh. Seeing blood, Ted deftly applied pressure to the wounds with the towel, then gaped at the nasty scars on her palms.

"What the..." he gasped. "Did you burn yourself?"

"Sort of."

"I'd think a doctor..."

"I never saw one."

"Why not? With proper treatment..."

Her kitchen duties completed, Mustang led him to the bathroom, rifling the medicine cabinet for bandages. As he assisted with applying gauze and adhesive tape, she sighed.

"Tell me, please," Ted insisted. "Was this some form of inhumane torture..."

"By the entity your boss believes paid me a call recently?"

"Not him. Never him. The primary reason Ollie hired me: I'm sensitive to the presence of... other beings, and that gives him a big edge when he's preaching to a live audience."

"So, you outed me?" Mustang snapped.

"Not intentionally. I was helping Sarah, as I said, and I evidently get a certain look on my face when something - or someone - is close at hand. Ollie had poked his head in to check we weren't doing... anything untoward, if you will, and he recognized..."

“Well, I won’t explain, because you wouldn’t believe me.”

Ted restored the supplies to the cupboard. “And, I won’t ask. But, if you know of a way I can get free...”

“Sure, I do. Put on your shoes, grab your bags, hike down the road and stick out your thumb for a hitch.”

“That’s... not what I meant.”

“Then, what *do* you mean?”

“I have to find a job to cover my expenses.”

“What expenses, if you’re living on Uncle Oliver’s dime?”

“I... bought a car, a house...”

“How deep are you in debt?” Mustang wondered.

“Half a mil.”

“Oh, hell!” She slumped on the counter. “What’d you buy, a Maserati and a mansion?”

“Pretty close.”

“You’re an idiot.”

She opened the door, nearly colliding with Oliver, suspicion reddening his flesh beneath that abundance of facial hair.

“What are you two up to in there?” he rumbled.

She raised her arms so he could view the bandages.

“Ah!” he conceded, his tone losing its accusatory edge. “Are they painful?”

His niece bit back a scathing retort. “I’m fine.”

“Ted, I need to consult with you about the videos we’ll be doing this week.”

The men proceeded along the hall; Mustang waited until they’d sequestered themselves in the guest room, then crept up to listen to their conversation.

She couldn’t make out much, Oliver’s voice surprisingly inaudible. When Ted shouted, “No, I won’t do it!” she scurried toward the kitchen. Sarah burst from her room as Ted bustled past, tugging on his coat.

He halted within inches of Mustang, pleading, “Get me the hell out of here!”

“How?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t give a damn. I just need to get as far away as possible!”

Tugging him outside, she practically dragged him through swirling drifts up the slope to where a rogue lightning bolt obeying her chance directive to return home had deposited her unconscious form.

“Are you nuts?” he shrieked.
She instructed, “Think of a place you’d be safe and happy.”
“Huh?”
“Just do it!”
Eyelids shut, Ted deliberated briefly. “Okay,” he announced.
A blinding flash enveloped him, and he vanished.

II

“Murderer!”
Oliver Duryea’s basso profundo reverberated from the kitchen stoop across the snow-laden landscape, as if projected through a bullhorn.
Mustang cringed. “Oh, hell...”
“Witch!”
Where supposed practitioners of what rabid Christians deemed the “dark arts” had been burned at the stake in past centuries, the teen could have easily torched her great-uncle for his prejudiced declaration...
And no one would’ve been the wiser.
His unyielding grip had her by the frayed flannel shirt collar within seconds.
“What did you do to him?”
“He wished to leave, so I obliged,” she responded matter-of-factly.
“Nonsense, child. I saw... I saw...”
“What did you see, Uncle?”
His voice grew almost prayerful. “I saw fire from heaven descend from a clear sky...”
“Yet, you condemn me as a witch?” she scoffed.
An ominous, “Where is he?”
“I have no idea.”
“You must!”
“The decision was his and, frankly, it didn’t matter to me.”
Shaking off his hold, she plodded toward the house. Before passing beneath the lintel, she turned and saw the preacher, on his knees, groping around a circle of scorched earth for some remnant of his assistant.
Mustang wasn’t about to divulge how, through the strike’s afterglow, she glimpsed Ted Wellington crumple on a lush green expanse in what might have been Ireland.
She’d be in enough trouble when Oliver confronted her parents about the phenomenon.

They knew nothing of what had transpired in Scotland, or that she'd even traveled there after being sent to Massachusetts to live with her maternal grandmother - who died within weeks of her arrival, leaving a passport and airline ticket for the girl, with a wish that she look up Jack Parsons, a man who'd supposedly perished in an explosion decades earlier.

A tragedy staged by the FBI to prevent the inventor of solid fuel booster rockets from selling his skills to foreign governments, supposedly.

Or, so Ben Espinoza had implied.

She'd sent that posturing agent soaring into Loch Ness with a spontaneous utterance.

A frightening way to discover she could control invisible forces with a word or a mere thought.

Transforming her great-uncle into a human snowman would eliminate that danger, and his exasperating presence...

She restrained herself from drastic action. Jerking her parka off its hook, she traversed the length of the dwelling and threw wide the front door, en route to the bunkhouse, only to reverse course when she heard the phone ringing behind her.

Not that the call would be for her. Having no friends, invariably pollsters or salesmen would launch their harangue, cut short when she plopped the receiver on its cradle.

Marred by static, the international operator announced a person-to-person call for Miss Elizabeth Duryea.

"Oh hell..." she hissed then, louder, "Speaking."

"Go ahead," whined the nasal soprano.

Following a series of pops and cracks, a vaguely familiar voice ventured, "Mustang?"

"Ted?" She sank on a metal dinette chair. "How'd you get this number?"

He snickered. "I had Ollie's address book in my coat pocket."

Nothing mysterious there.

"Don't tell me you want to come back..." she remarked.

"Well, I *am* in a bit of a pickle."

"How so?"

"My passport *isn't* in my pocket, and the police want to know how I got here."

Not that the girl sanctioned lying... "Say you were mugged and it was stolen."

“Not when they were in the middle of clearing a mob of protesters from the park where the lightning bolt unloaded me and saw the whole thing.”

“Oh, hell.” She glanced at the clock on the stove: 10:17. “What time is it there?”

A pause. “Quarter after six.”

“And, where are you?”

“The Garda station near St. Stephen’s Green in Dublin.”

Whatever Mustang did to enable Ted’s escape, the building would collapse - not an ideal resolution to the dilemma.

“You feeling lightheaded?” she pressed.

“Yeah. I was flat on the grass for fifteen minutes right after...”

“Tell the cops you need some fresh air.”

“What good will that do?”

“I’ll give you a minute to get outside. Then, count to three and take off running as fast as you can.” As an afterthought, she added, “Are you handcuffed?”

“Sure am.”

“Don’t let them see that you’re not.”

Through the static, she heard the metallic click of shackles unfastened.

“What, then?”

“The cops will be otherwise occupied, and you’ll be on your own.”

“I guess I should thank you...” Ted stammered.

“Don’t bother.”

Breaking the connection, Mustang watched the second hand on the clock complete one cycle. She envisioned a cadre of Irish police officers buffeted by a microburst of wind, nearby trash receptacles dumping their contents, and heavier debris pummeling them.

She rose, strangely exhausted, to find Sarah staring at her.

“What?” sputtered the girl.

Quite serious, the secretary purred, “I heard everything on the extension. What’s your racket?”

“None of your business.” Mustang brushed past the pink satin-robed woman, who caught her arm.

“If you don’t ‘fess up, I’ll let Oliver have you.”

Mustang’s hazel eyes met conniving brown orbs. “Blackmail?”

“Not a very pleasant word, but, yes.”

“Is that why Oliver keeps you around? Because you have the goods on him?” Mustang wrenched loose. “His drinking, the bar fights, and who knows what other disgusting scandals?”

“That, and he likes...”

Sarah’s quasi-innocent shrug spoke volumes.

On Mustang’s list of most despicable hypocrites, Oliver Duryea jumped to the number one position. “How much is he worth?”

“A few hundred million, at least.”

“And you want a sizeable chunk of that for yourself?”

“Why not? He’s not paying me half as much as he should so, little by little, I’m siphoning off the excess...”

This inexplicable forthrightness boded ill, in Mustang’s estimation. Like the classic movies she loved to watch, when a criminal spilled his guts, it usually meant death for the hero.

Or, worse.

To the girl’s left, Oliver filled the kitchen doorframe, fuming as a subfreezing blast offset the furnace’s heat.

He’d heard most of Sarah’s narrative, and a volcano on the verge of erupting posed less of a threat than his rage.

Mustang’s hushed invective immobilized him temporarily, eliminating the probability that an actual murder would be committed, permanently staining the floorboards.

“Sarah, if I were you, I’d grab my purse, wake one of the drivers and haul ass.”

Tawny head swiveling toward him, the lithe body convulsed. “I thought he was in bed!”

“Move!” Mustang insisted. “I can handle him, if you just disappear.”

Convinced of the wisdom of this advice, the woman fled as fast as her stilettos would carry her. Her breath puffs of icy fog crossing the expanse to the bunkhouse, she stumbled on the porch and literally fell into the vaulted living room.

Mustang contemplated at leisure how to deal with her great-uncle. An unscrupulous bully, he lorded it over his underlings yet, blinded by personal fetishes, neglected to perform simple background checks on those privy to his empire’s inner workings.

Compelling him to cough up his various improprieties more an exercise for a professional therapist, she deliberated planting the inspiration to make a hasty departure, so the lesser Duryeas could resume their normal routine - if that bizarre dynamic could be considered normal.

She could slip past him and pick up the phone... The media would have a field day destroying his feigned integrity and charitable endeavors. Her curiosity piqued, however...

“Uncle Oliver, what did you want Ted to do that he refused so vehemently?” she inquired quietly.

In a stilted tone, as if fighting a compulsion, he muttered, “I told him to seduce you and, thus disgraced by his daughter’s moral failings, your father would sign over the ranch to me...”

“Oh, hell...”

Then, a sharp, “Bastard!”

Mustang had never witnessed her mother so incensed. She and Joe, rattled by Sarah’s conduct, had tramped from their make-shift quarters in time to eavesdrop on this exchange. Without hesitation, she approached this guest and slapped his motionless cheek.

Her daughter recognized a minuscule grimace of pain tighten his lips.

Unaware of Oliver’s involuntary paralysis, Joe drew his wife aside and raised his fists to defend the family honor - another first in Mustang’s lifetime. When his uncle failed to react, he retreated, confused.

“You may not wish to engage in violence,” the rancher drawled, “but if you don’t vacate the premises within an hour, you’ll have no choice but to make amends for your insults.”

Taking Maggie’s arm, Joe led her outdoors without a backward glance. Beyond the picture window, one of the SUVs issued a stream of white smoke as it shifted into gear and bounced along the gravel drive to the road.

Sarah had made her departure with only the clothes she wore.

The Montana State Police apprehended her as a wanted fugitive with multiple outstanding warrants before she boarded the Duryea Evangelistic Crusade’s private Cessna at the Helena Airport, the papers reported in subsequent editions. Resisting arrest, the taser used to subdue her got its wires tangled with an extension cord on the hangar floor, causing her death by electrocution.

In hindsight, maybe Ted Wellington should have been remanded to the Irish Garda’s custody, too, Mustang mused, all three of less than stellar character...

Not that the younger man could have coaxed her into bed - a felony, since she had another year before turning 18. No differently than any of the boys at Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High, his inherently cocky attitude repulsed her, though some might have judged him handsome with the shaggy mop of black hair and athlete’s physique.

“Well, Uncle Oliver,” she sighed, “you’d best be on your way.”

Released from unseen bonds, the preacher seized Mustang's narrow shoulders and shook her so hard she thought he'd snap her neck.

"You insolent bitch!" he grunted. "How dare you cast a spell on me..."

Sure, those who didn't comprehend her predicament - meaning the vast majority of human beings on the planet - might consider how nature fulfilled her mandates as "spells" like in the old television series *Bewitched* or the Harry Potter novels and films. That no gestures or incantations accompanied the occurrences, however, negated this comparison.

"If you're the holy man of God you claim to be, no spell would have any effect on you," she remonstrated, squirming. "Now, the clock is ticking, Better get packing."

"I'll not budge from this spot until you've begged forgiveness for invoking evil under this roof!"

Mustang would've needed to stand on a chair to be level with his menacing scowl, the height difference so drastic, but she let her words suffice. "Evil? You're the one who should be ashamed for your evil deeds. Not only do you bilk a naive public out of their money on false pretenses, but you pose as a conscientious citizen while sleeping with your secretary, swilling every drop of liquor within reach, and pounding the crap out of those who criticize you!"

Any hope the girl might have entertained that these statements would squelch his conceit rapidly faded. His digits constricted around her biceps; her temper flared. "Get off!"

A substantial electrical current shot through Oliver's limbs; he collapsed on the damp and muddy braided area rug.

His face a terrified mask, she squatted and placed her bandaged palm on his chest.

No heartbeat.

"Oh, hell..."

She hadn't planned to kill him but, again, her impulsiveness had wreaked havoc.

The uniformed chauffeur who came to fetch Oliver's luggage - ejected by Joe from the bunkhouse, along with the video team - joined her beside his employer, removing his cap solemnly.

"So, his heart finally betrayed him, eh?" came the declaration.

Mustang squinted at him. "Say again?"

"He was diagnosed with congestive heart failure last summer. This was going to be his final hurrah before he retired to enjoy his wealth in Florida. When your dad upset him, the stress must've been too much."

“Not my dad. Me.”

“You?” chortled the paunchy driver. “Nothing you could do...”

“You’d be shocked.”

“Fine. Whatever. You’ll have to ring the coroner to get the death certificate in order.”

“There’s the phone. You do it.”

“It’s not my house.”

“Then, go tell my dad. He’ll take care of it.”

Again, the man declined.

“Why not?” the girl spat.

“I’m not giving my name to anyone connected with law enforcement.”

“What, you’re another criminal?” she mocked.

The slight nod thoroughly amused Mustang. This ridiculous mess could potentially ruin her father’s reputation with those who purchased the finest horseflesh in the state - and beyond - for their own stables. While Joe rarely spoke to her, preferring she’d been born a son, she couldn’t let him suffer for her mistakes.

Her right index finger stroking Oliver’s excessive beard, he abruptly sucked in a lungful of air and bolted upright.

The chauffeur recoiled, scrambling on all fours toward the living room sofa. “He was right!”

Mustang straightened. “Right about what?”

“My brother. He’s a meteorologist with the National Weather Service. He told me a couple months ago there are strange things going on in these parts...”

The teen’s auburn tresses flipped forward, hiding her face. “Oh, hell.”

III

“Hank, you got your keys?” gurgled Oliver Duryea.

The chauffeur replied, “Sure, Reverend.”

“Bring the car around. You’re taking me to the hospital.”

“Yes, sir.” Consternation forgotten, Hank scurried toward the door.

“You, child,” Oliver hailed his great-niece. “What do they call you?”

Hazel eyes rolled ceilingward. Just like her father, who never addressed her by name.

He continued, “You’re coming with me.”

“Why?”

“For one: I don’t think Joe is in the mood to tend a sick relative. Two: you’re the key to the weird shit going on around here, and I want the truth.”

Good luck, Mustang quipped silently.

Hank rejoined them, the Mercedes idling with the heater blowing full tilt. He assisted Oliver onto the passenger seat, Mustang consigned to the rear.

The Canyon Creek hospital was more a glorified clinic and, at that late hour, the nursing assistant on duty had to summon the doctor from home.

Balding and groggy, Doc Bascomb still wore his pajama shirt beneath white scrubs as he rushed into the examination room.

“You look healthy to me,” he complained to Oliver, whose bulk bowed the gurney. “What’s your problem?”

“I had a heart attack earlier this evening.”

“Nonsense.” Bascomb consulted the chart. “Your pulse and blood pressure are absolutely within acceptable range.”

“That’s what’s so baffling. I need you to authorize an EKG.”

“If you’re willing to pay for it.”

“Indeed,” Oliver consented.

Round sticky pads were applied to the patient’s barrel chest once he shed his suit jacket, vest, gold-striped tie and white silk shirt, passing each garment to Mustang. She awkwardly draped them over a molded plastic chair.

She would rather have been home in bed, asleep.

Wire leads connected, the portable device switched on, Bascomb monitored the printout, detached. He ripped off the gridded sheet and showed it to Oliver.

“There’s not a thing wrong with your heart,” he commented, commandeering the nursing assistant’s file and scratching out “congestive heart failure” with his pen.

“That’s... crazy!” protested Oliver, glaring at his companion.

“If your regular big-city cardiologist falsified the diagnosis, my friend, I fear it was to pad his billing.”

The local physician exited the curtained cubicle, swearing under his breath at the disruption of a night’s slumber. The middle-aged woman settled at the curved desk to prepare the discharge paperwork. Mustang restored Oliver’s clothes and moved to withdraw; he blocked her egress with his leg.

“Not so fast, dear girl. You’re not leaving this room until you tell me everything.”

Mustang didn't want to admit the truth to herself, much less her great-uncle. Once more, she'd not considered her actions: rather than simply reverse the mishap, she'd completely cured him.

Nonetheless...

"What do I get out of it, if I do?" she taunted.

"A heavy burden lifted from your shoulders."

She gagged.

"What *do* you want?"

"You, gone from the ranch, never to contact us again."

"Blood is thicker than water, dear girl."

"And, if I thinned your blood to water, where would you be?" she sniffed.

If she laid her cards on the table, she couldn't trust he wouldn't do to her what Sarah tried to do to him: blackmail.

He wanted the ranch...

"Before I agree to your request, I want to know why you're so hot to get your grimy mitts on our property."

"That's personal."

Mustang smirked. "Fine. I can keep my personal information to myself, too."

His intense, unblinking blue eyes yearned to bore into her soul, but failed. He might win a staring contest against some gullible sucker; she had total confidence in her ability to put him in a coffin, if necessary.

"Very well," he groaned. "My brother - your grandfather - let slip on his deathbed that a vein of gold runs through the north pasture."

Mustang exploded with laughter, rankling the older man. "I've heard Dad joke about that every time Grandpa's name is mentioned. He invented the tale to postpone the county auctioning the land for unpaid taxes. The bank manager granted him a loan to cover the debt on Gramp's promise to split the profits..."

Oliver's thin lips pursed, almost obscured by his mustache and beard. "You're lying."

She shook her head in disbelief. "In your field of expertise, what happens to liars?"

"They are damned to hell."

"Or..."

"Or?" he echoed.

"Can't they be struck by lightning?"

"If they falsely swear by God's ineffable name..."

"Or..."

“Oh, stop with the riddles, child!”

“If I lied, I couldn’t touch a sacred object without incurring divine wrath.”

“So the scriptures say.”

Mustang had long since abandoned any sort of faith in a supreme being, having taken the lessons from a course in world religions to heart. Thus, she reached inside Oliver’s unbuttoned shirt and clasped the large silver cross on a heavy chain with her bandaged palm.

Nothing untoward occurred.

“Convinced?” she scolded.

The salt-and-pepper mane subtly bobbed in affirmation.

“Good. Since you no longer have a reason to disgrace me or con my father out of the deed, you can pack up and go...”

“Ah, but you’ve not told me...”

The nursing assistant retracted the curtains, a clipboard and pen at the ready. Oliver signed on the designated line, accepted his copy of the document and waved her away.

His great-niece knew she’d been trapped in a corner. “Not here.”

“Then, where?”

“There’s a bar down the block...”

The proximity of alcohol elicited an excitement that stunned the girl. His fingers accelerated the process of dressing, and he whisked her into the night, signaling Hank to follow in the SUV.

Marty’s Hole-in-the-Wall Tavern the sole establishment in town open after 10:00 pm, a sparse Sunday clientele allowed for the pair’s choice of booth. The bartender never asked Mustang to show her I.D. - not that she ordered anything but soda, to Oliver’s dismay.

“Why bring me here, if you don’t drink?” he pondered.

“You might as well be comfortable while you listen...”

“Good idea.”

Her scheme to get him drunk, unfortunately, backfired. He drained two pitchers of beer on his own, along with six double shots of Dewar’s whiskey. Then, he commenced buying drinks for the half-dozen seated at the bar, pouring rum and making random toasts.

The mere thought of those liquors knotted Mustang’s stomach, though the welcome distraction preempted her disclosure.

Too bad a slovenly punk, well past his limit, slurred an inquiry about Oliver’s taste in jail bait - deriding Mustang’s youth, almost boyish slimness, ratty jeans, flannel shirt and parka.

“If you want something a little more appealing, I know a gal whose knockers will keep you happy,” he concluded his tirade.

Earning a right cross to the nose.

“Oh, hell!”

Without his handlers to intervene, Oliver landed in a holding cell, the story of his consumption - as tallied by the bartender - behavior, and mugshot transmitted by the wire service to every major news outlet in the country before dawn.

No one saw Mustang duck out the rear door, instructing Hank to drive her home.

“But, the reverend...” objected the chauffeur.

“Will be safe until his arraignment before the county judge. We’ll both need some rest before then.”

With the visiting trio gone, Mustang sneaked through her bedroom window - always kept unlocked. Better to sack out on her own mattress, though she changed the sheets, irritated by the scent of Sarah’s perfume.

Joe and Maggie never fathomed she’d been absent.

Nor had anyone informed them of their relative’s incarceration. When Maggie dutifully trudged to the house to prepare breakfast, she found the bedrooms in absolute disarray: Sarah’s belongings piled in a heap while Mustang breathed evenly beneath the quilt; Ted’s bags still half-full in the guest quarters, his underwear strewn on the carpet and shirts scattered on the dresser. Oliver’s attire had been neatly draped on hangers in the closet, the rest of his possessions dumped on the king-sized mattress.

Mustang’s shoulder was roughly shaken, the aroma of bacon in her nostrils fully rousing her.

“Mom?” she gurgled.

“Where are they?”

“Ted and Sarah took off. Uncle Oliver is... well...”

“What, honey?”

“He’s in the can.”

Maggie shuddered. “In the can?”

“Picked up for drunkenness and assault.”

“How? When?”

“Last night, at Marty’s.”

“Who told you?”

Before the facts slipped out, Mustang bit her tongue. Her parents may disregard her truancy, her prolonged meanderings, but her presence in a bar might ignite a firestorm...

“Heard it on the radio,” the teen bluffed, her feet swinging onto the floor.

“That’s terrible!” Maggie gulped. “I’ve got to tell your father!” She retreated toward the hall, then halted. “Why’d you sleep in your clothes?”

“Too tired to change.”

No lie.

Joe sat at the kitchen table, waiting for his meal. When Maggie relayed the news about his uncle, he grunted, “That’s a relief.”

Then, the phone rang.

Maggie passed the receiver to Joe as Mustang sidled toward the refrigerator, filling a tumbler with orange juice while listening to the conversation.

“Yes, he’s been visiting,” Joe grumped.

A pause, then, “No, he can’t live here until his trial if he posts bail.”

He slammed the handset onto its cradle and whisked from the room.

The noon television broadcast reported that internationally lauded Reverend Oliver Duryea had pleaded not guilty to felony assault, along with misdemeanor charges of public intoxication, and been released from Canyon Creek municipal jail on \$200,000 bond, due to his lack of connections in the region and risk he would fail to appear for the scheduled trial.

Meekly, Hank knocked mid-afternoon, petitioning Maggie to allow him to pack his employer’s belongings for the trip to Helena.

From the bedroom door, Mustang watched him collect designer attire - a custom-made corset prominent.

She grinned, envisioning Oliver being zipped into the contraption. Then, idly, “He sober, or hung over?”

“He has a tremendous capacity for liquor,” replied the chauffeur. “He never gets hangovers.”

“Good for him.”

“It’s all your fault, you know.”

“Says who?”

“If you’d urged him to take better care of himself after seeing the doctor...”

“I’m not his keeper.”

“You were responsible for...”

Mustang felt her temper rising, and didn’t try to subdue the emotional upheaval. “Go ahead, Hank, I dare you.”

Using his paunch to compress the badly stuffed suitcase's halves and fasten the latches, Hank's jaw hardened and he fumbled the assorted luggage out to the SUV, leaving behind the briefcase that had previously been in Ted's possession.

Nor did Hank retrieve it before driving off amidst a light snowfall.

The premise of changing the sheets allowed Mustang to wrap the briefcase in the bundle and carry it to her room. There, she tucked it in her closet until she started a load of laundry, adding the perfume-laden items from her own bed.

Seated on the bare mattress minutes later, she laid the case flat and opened the clasps. Lifting the lid, she discovered nothing unusual.

Yet.

Ted's passport was clipped to an expandable pocket; at some point, Mustang would forward it to him - either by conventional mail or her own unique methods. Tucked behind that divider, a thick bank envelope held \$10,000 in hundreds.

"Petty cash," scoffed the girl.

Manila file folders marked with initials were stacked atop assorted adult magazines which, familiar with Oliver's immoral activities, didn't faze her.

"You buy them for the articles," she snorted, recalling excuses made by celebrities and politicians for having such trash in their possession.

A leather-bound portfolio contained legal briefs and property deeds. Mustang read these carefully, amazed at the repetitive language. In essence, Oliver Duryea had been sued in California civil court for sexual harassment by a former female employee, who claimed he made unwanted advances toward her at the ministry's corporate offices.

Scrawled across the last page with a red marker: "Paid off/\$150,000. NDA signed, witnessed and notarized."

"Oh, hell..."

He'd averted a trial by writing a check to his victim, swearing her to silence.

Reviewing other documents, Mustang learned her great-uncle had spent millions to settle a dozen similar lawsuits.

A loud chime signaled an end to the washing machine's cycle. Sliding the case under the bed, she left to transfer the linens to the dryer.

Good thing she'd taken the precaution. Busy cleaning the refrigerator, her mother directed her to gather every towel from the bathrooms - those unused, as well - and start another load.

"The very thought those... people defiled our home makes my skin crawl," Maggie proclaimed.

For once, the teen commiserated with her mother's discomfort.

Ted may have sensed the remnants of Mephistopheles' presence; the lingering pall of Oliver's hypocrisy would require professional fumigation to dispel.

Settled again behind the closed door, Mustang inspected the each file in turn. On top, the one marked "A.D." did not mean "Anno Domini" - the Year of Our Lord. A sheaf of papers detailed Oliver's attempts over three decades to acquire the Duryea horse ranch from his older brother - Joe's father - Andrew.

That villain really believed the legend of a gold vein running through the pasture, and his tactics amazed his great-niece. In his twenties, he organized a rigged poker game so Andrew would have no choice but to bet the ranch against a huge pot. The trio contracted to stack the deck in Oliver's favor failed miserably.

Andrew won over \$15,000, and the three men disappeared as if they never existed.

Mustang sank on the pillows, staring at the ceiling.

Oliver had accused *her* of murder, while responsible for numerous deaths to protect his public image and gnawing greed.

That was only the tip of the iceberg.

IV

Into the evening - having skipped lunch - Mustang devoured scribbled details of Oliver Duryea's endless machinations, all the while smiling for the cameras as he pledged prosperity for the masses if they mailed him contributions or - with the proliferation of internet access - used their credit cards to donate online.

One file included a spreadsheet of his ministry's yearly income, possibly for a tax audit. No current figures included, the previous fiscal total exceeded \$200 million.

More disturbing: logs of indiscretions by key benefactors, used to extort continued "voluntary" donations of vast sums.

Among these, Ted Wellington, Sr.

No wonder young Ted's father refused to pay for his son's graduate studies, Mustang realized. He was on the hook to Oliver to protect his manufacturing plant.

Overall, Oliver amounted to little more than a con-artist with a magnetic personality, she concluded. When she surrendered the briefcase's contents to the local prosecutor - by some means that would ensure her anonymity - he would be convicted and sentenced to a very long prison term.

A final discovery confirmed Ted, Jr. wasn't the upstanding soul he pretended to be, either. Stuffed in a large, clasped white envelope below the dirty magazines: Jack Parsons' journals.

So much for sending the young man his passport.

Seething, Mustang hid the case under the bed, jerked on her leather boots and stomped through the house, forgetting the unfinished laundry. She snatched her parka and pulled it over the flannel shirt she'd worn for more than 24 hours, yanking the kitchen door wide and marching through artistically crafted drifts to the slope.

"Ted Wellington, Junior, you come here, now!" she bellowed against the wind.

Ten feet in front of her, lightning melted snow as it contacted the ground, leaving a semi-conscious figure in its wake.

Mustang didn't wait until Ted recovered his wits, unconcerned that he'd evidently been asleep - given the time difference and his lack of clothes except blue boxers. She dragged him to his feet and shoved him toward the house.

Indoors, the pair missed Maggie and Joe carrying in groceries by a few seconds. Mustang elbowed Ted into her room and leaned against the door to prevent his flight.

"What's going on?" he demanded, wrapping himself in the quilt from the bed.

She barked, "Look down."

"Why?"

"Do it!"

Grey eyes narrow, he surveyed the floor, pausing when he sighted the briefcase peeking from under the metal frame.

"Pick it up," she ordered.

Guilt furrowed the young man's brow as he wrestled to hold the quilt and the case, plopping the latter on the mattress.

"Open it."

Trembling fingers could not maneuver the latches. Frustrated, Mustang joined him and popped the lid. Parsons' handwritten journals indicted Oliver's assistant without a word.

"I... I..." Ted stammered, sinking against the night stand.

Mustang spat, "Hoped to emulate your employer's skill set?"

"No, not at all!"

"Then, what?"

“Given my... sensitivity to ethereal beings, I’ve done a lot of research on spiritualism and the occult. Jack Parsons’ name is scattered through the papers and dissertations I managed to find, but little else was recorded about him beyond his work on jet fuel. Seeing his name inside the cover, I wanted to learn from his experience...”

In his slumped position, Mustang looked him straight in the eye. “No one knows about these,” she hissed. “There are people who would kill to get their hands on some of the formulas - governments, mostly. They’re mine, because I found them after he... died and, even if I trusted you, I’d never let you touch them.”

Ted stiffened. “What are you saying? Parsons died in the early 1950s. You’re just a kid...”

Mustang bit her lip. “Oh, hell.”

A feeble knock on the door jolted them both. “Hon?” Maggie called. “Is someone in there with you?”

Signaling Ted into the closet, Mustang drew the brass knob inward. “Just the TV, Mom. What’s up?”

“The laundry needs to be changed over, and the beds remade, for one.” Suspicious orbs scanned the chamber. “Also, the prosecutor phoned. He wants to see you.”

“See me? What for?”

“Something to do with Uncle Oliver.”

“Oh, hell.”

So much for being anonymous.

“Have they set a trial date?” the girl queried.

“Two weeks from Thursday, but they anticipate he’ll change his plea to guilty, to avoid the media circus expected since he’s so well known.”

In an undertone, Mustang grumbled, “That won’t happen.”

“Your father will drive you to town.”

Another strained interaction with Joe, the girl lamented.

Maggie advised, “Better shower and change into something decent.”

“Sure, Mom.”

Her mind abuzz with options, Ted’s sneer as he emerged from his concealment aggravated her further.

“Oliver’s been arrested?” he prodded.

“Bar fight.”

“Surprise, surprise.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t hear about it.”

“On the run through the Irish countryside, I didn’t have access to the comforts of home.”

Mustang squared her shoulders, an idea blossoming. “You want your home back, and your fancy car?”

“Sure. Who wouldn’t?”

“Take that to the prosecutor.” She pointed to the briefcase. “Then, I won’t have to deal with him.”

Ted shivered. “In this?”

“There are sweats in the top drawer of the chest. They’re baggy, they should fit you.”

“I’ll look real professional,” he quipped.

“Your stuff is still in the guest room. I haven’t had a chance to clean up in there.”

“Better.” He reached for the door. “If I do as you say, will you let me read the journals?”

“Not on your life.”

“Because you don’t want to explain how they came into your possession?”

“I told you that already.”

“You lied, you mean.”

She bumped the wood panel, nearly crushing his fingers in the gap. “Ted, you don’t want to see me angry. I do horrible things when I’m angry.”

“Like manifest lightning bolts from clear skies?”

“Worse, far worse.”

“What, for instance?”

“Push me, and you’ll regret it.” She allowed him to pass. “Go, get dressed, and meet me out back in ten minutes, but be sure my folks don’t see you.”

He bowed in mock cooperation. “Yes, ma’am.”

Let his sarcasm go, Mustang reminded herself. It’s not worth the trouble.

Rifling the contents of the briefcase one last time, she removed the journals and restored them to their cubbyhole in her closet, wedging the cut section of drywall in place. Then, she went to tend the laundry.

The dryer pouring steam from its outdoor vent, she tossed Ted the keys to her father’s Chevy Suburban when he slunk down the concrete steps.

“You’ve got forty-five minutes to make the trip,” she stated.

“Except, I don’t know where I’m going.”

“Right at the end of the drive, all the way. The town hall is at the corner of Main and First Street. Can’t miss it.”

“And I just walk into the prosecutor’s office - after business hours, no less - and drop this like some hot potato?”

“His staff will accept delivery, no questions asked.”

She didn’t watch him depart; she needed to shower, comb her auburn curls into a pony tail and crawl into clothes more suited to a funeral.

That would waste plenty of time.

Once the prosecutor looked at the evidence, she guessed he would notify them the appointment had been canceled, any testimony she could offer moot in the face of a score of felony charges.

What Mustang didn’t anticipate: Oliver Duryea’s need for revenge.

Ted, successful in his quest, tossed Joe’s keyring through her bedroom window, grabbed the rolling case she’d crammed with his remaining possessions and jumped into a waiting Toyota minivan he’d engaged for the drive to Helena, where he could buy a plane ticket to destinations unknown.

“Good riddance,” she mumbled.

Wednesday’s morning edition featured a four-column color photo of that tan Toyota wrapped around an oak, with details how the vehicle, accelerating on a curve, slid on a patch of black ice. The driver and his passenger perished in the crash.

Mustang crumpled the newsprint, anguished. If she hadn’t recalled Ted from Ireland...

As the ranch resumed a standard routine in the following days, Oliver - holed up in a Helena hotel because the terms of his bail prevented him from leaving Montana, with an ankle monitor to enforce his compliance - had Hank chasing after gourmet meals, books and videos to assuage his boredom.

Friday, the sheriff - bearing a fresh indictment - arrested the preacher anew and transported him to Canyon Creek.

The prisoner denied any wrongdoing, according to the media, ranting that materials spread on the prosecutor’s desk had been fabricated by disgruntled former employees and rivals eager to discredit him.

“Then, there’s the girl...” An unnamed witness informed a journalist that Oliver hinted.

The prosecutor countered, “What girl?”

“My nephew’s daughter.”

“Your nephew? Joe Duryea?”

“Correct.”

“What’s his daughter got to do with this?”

“She... she...” The witness described Oliver’s face as red with rage. “She’s a menace, pure and simple. Tried to kill my assistant, kill me...”

“How old is she?” the prosecutor continued.

“I don’t know. Fifteen, sixteen...”

“And, her name?”

“I have no clue.”

A brief consultation with the sheriff confirmed Mustang - though the press did not identify her, as a minor - had been on law enforcement’s radar since aiding Dr. Jonas Fairchild, impersonating teacher Wilfrid Bailey at the high school, after he murdered three students in a psychotic rampage.

The teen had been poring over the article when deputies arrived to escort her to town.

She didn’t bother to change from her green hooded sweatshirt, jeans and mud-encrusted boots, shrugging into her parka as Maggie watched.

Not that either of her parents would come to her defense. Joe occupied himself with the horses, the ranch hands off until the first of the month. Maggie, for whatever reason, had never acquired a driver’s license.

Turns out, they wouldn’t even flip through the yellow pages to hire a lawyer.

Mustang sat in a police interrogation room, glass lining the far wall - a two-way mirror. The steel table and chairs were bolted to the concrete floor, making it impossible to relax.

Thanks to her power over nature, she harbored no worries. No cell could hold her, as she’d discovered during the debacle after Jack Parsons’ death in Scotland.

The gentleman who entered - no other term adequate for his forty-ish dignified demeanor and well-groomed image - set a two-inch white binder on the table before taking his seat.

“Would you like anything to drink? Water? A soda?” he offered.

“No, thanks.”

“My name is Neal Evans.”

“I know who you are, Mr. Evans,” remarked Mustang. “I’ve seen your picture on election posters.”

“Good, that makes this a bit easier.”

“Easier for who?”

“For you, and for me.”

“How so?”

He sank on the hard seat. "First, you're not under arrest, so you don't have to answer my questions, if you don't wish to do so."

"I'm willing to cooperate, if you'll explain what's up."

"Your uncle, Oliver Duryea..."

"My great-uncle," she interspersed.

"Right. He's in a world of hurt, as they say, and he's trying to implicate you."

Mustang leaned forward, resting her elbows on the dented surface and her chin in her hands. "Y'know something? I always seem to be in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Meaning, it's only by chance..."

"Yeah. A couple months back, I walked in on Wilfrid Bailey's bloodbath and ended up the hostage of an escaped lunatic. Now, just because I made sure you had all the evidence against ol' Oliver, he's trying to railroad me..."

"So..."

"You read the files in his briefcase?" she asked.

Evans nodded his blond mop.

"Some of the information dates back decades. I never saw him before last Saturday. I couldn't invent such an intricate mess. Hell, I'm little better than a high school dropout."

"Yes, I'm privy to your attendance record," chuckled the prosecutor. "But, you're clearly a bright young lady. Why would Mr. Duryea nurture such a strong resentment toward you?"

"Because I saw through him the minute he showed up at our house. He plays the God game for the money and prestige, willing to screw over anyone who gets in his way, or whose sins can be used to stuff his wallet."

"A rather harsh assessment from someone so young."

"But true, eh?"

"From what I've seen, yes." Evans rose and stretched incredibly long arms. "What about his heart condition?"

"What heart condition?"

"He swears he has a bad heart, so I verified the information with both his physician in Chicago and Doctor Bascomb. Their diagnoses... differ, to put it mildly."

"What's that got to do with me?"

"Doctor Bascomb is my brother-in-law. He told me you were with Mr. Duryea when he came to the hospital late Sunday. The bartender at Marty's also mentioned a teenager in his company before the fight."

“Sure. I tagged along to keep the peace, since he nearly died...”

“Died? How...”

“He was on the receiving end of a nasty shock.”

“What kind of shock?”

“Electrical.”

“You mean, from a lamp, a kitchen appliance?”

How to explain? Mustang deliberated. “All I saw was his eyes go funny before he hit the floor.”

The grinding of a key in the lock preceded a deputy’s urgent interruption. He bent to whisper in Evans’ ear, the prosecutor nudged him away.

“Just say what you have to say.”

“Oliver Duryea is dead.”

Both Evans and Mustang leapt up, chorusing, “What?”

They rushed together down the corridor, through a bolted iron gate to a holding cell. Paramedics were loading the deceased on a gurney, his face shrouded by a blanket.

“What happened?” demanded Evans.

“Natural causes,” Doc Bascomb replied, emerging from the cramped space.

“In his fifties?” Evans challenged. “That’s crazy.”

“Congenital heart failure.”

A lively argument about Oliver’s health lasted but a minute, with the physician offering to let Evans attend the autopsy.

Neither knew that, during her questioning, Mustang mandated nature to reinstate her great-uncle’s condition as it had been Sunday noon.

He would bother his relatives - and his blackmail victims - no more.

Mustang could expunge the hatred that had consumed her soul for nearly a week. She simply wanted to get back to riding her pinto, Heartbeat, around the Duryea ranch pastures, breaking ice on the water troughs and unloading hay for the horses.