

The Mustang Chronicles:

Cornered Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

Rare the occasion Elizabeth “Mustang” Duryea felt physically ill. She’d seldom suffered through cold symptoms, or fever caused by flu, not even chicken pox or a rash from poison ivy.

Emerging from the barn that wintry Tuesday evening after grooming her pinto Heartbeat, however, a dizziness seized her, her lungs tightened and her stomach flipped.

An older style black Ford Taurus station wagon idled on the gravel in front of the brick ranch, an intricate crest emblazoned on the driver’s door, surrounded by bold lettering proclaiming it the property of Montana Department of Justice, Forensic Science Division, Medical Examiner.

“Oh, hell...” she sputtered, breath creating a cloud.

Scarcely ten days had passed since her great-uncle Oliver’s somewhat suspicious death in a Canyon Creek holding cell, in the wake of the car wreck that had killed his assistant, Ted Wellington, Jr. On the premise that bad things happen in threes, the less-than-law-abiding secretary, Sarah Gutierrez, preceded these men in death while resisting arrest on outstanding warrants at the Helena Airport, when taser wires became tangled with an extension cord in the hangar where she’d been attempting to board a private jet.

None of the tragedies happened on this property, yet the mandated investigation had led a forensic pathologist to the Duryea’s door.

Mustang opted to circle the single level structure to her unlocked bedroom window; perhaps, if she moved quietly, she could avoid any interaction with this visitor - not to mention her parents.

No such luck.

The zipper of her parka snagged on the window frame as she hoisted herself over the sill, and she tumbled onto the floor, bumping her night stand. Quick reflexes prevented a ceramic lamp from shattering on the wood.

Recovering, an inevitable knock signaled her doom.

“Hon?” came Maggie Duryea’s tense soprano. “Are you in there?”

Through grit teeth, “Yeah, Mom.”

“I didn’t know you were home.”

The teen smirked. There were a lot of things her mother didn’t know: she hadn’t attended school that day, she’d inherited phenomenal control over the natural elements from occultist and scientist Jack Parsons, and she’d been responsible for more than one death.

“I... was taking a nap,” she bluffed.

“Oh.” An ominous hesitation. “Would you come out and meet our guest?”

Guest, the girl snorted in contempt. “Sure, Mom.”

Mustang didn't bother to change her grubby red flannel shirt and mud-splattered jeans, pausing only long enough to kick off her snow boots and free her auburn tresses from their pony tail.

Following Maggie down the hall, through the kitchen and into the living room, where a fire crackled on the grate, she gasped when the tweed jacket-clad figure rose from the sofa, like a gentleman from classic movies she enjoyed watching on chilly nights. Joe, her father, remained seated - of course.

“This is Doctor Quincy,” stated Maggie. “He's the senior medical examiner for the state.”

A manicured right hand extended toward Mustang; she grasped it firmly. Rather than immediately release his grip, though, he managed to flip her palm upward and scrutinize the scars caused by her travel via lightning bolt from Scotland months earlier.

As he did so, she squinted at him. No younger than 50, well-groomed hair ran the gamut from grey sideburns to flecks of brown and black pulled across his forehead from a left side part. Cheeks pock-marked, a redness tinging his nose hinted at a fondness for alcohol. He might have been considered short in stature, standing eye-to-eye with her mother.

He'd definitely seen better days, Mustang surmised.

“Nice to meet you, young lady,” came an unaccented baritone.

She bit back a chuckle at his phrasing. “Likewise.”

“Please, have a seat.”

For lack of space, she settled on an ottoman near the spindled rocking chair Maggie occupied.

“Would you like some water? A soda?” Quincy inquired.

Odd, this man offering her hospitality in her own home.

“No, thanks.”

Joe interspersed, “The doc is looking into Uncle Oliver's death.”

“Really?” Mustang never could be sure if her efforts to feign innocence proved effective. “The officer who found him in the cell thought he'd had a heart attack.”

“Then, you *were* there when it happened?” accused Quincy.

She corrected, “A few minutes after.”

“Had you come to visit him?”

Mustang nearly gagged at the thought. “Oh, hell, no. I'd been brought in for questioning by Neal Evans, the county prosecutor.”

“About your uncle’s alleged illegal activities?”

“Yup. He’d supposedly accused me of falsifying documents in a briefcase that contained scads of evidence against him.”

Quincy seemed to relax, lounging on overstuffed, plaid cushions. Maggie and Joe shifted uncomfortably.

“Well?” snarled the elder Duryea.

The medical examiner’s gaze traveled from the parents to their offspring. “Mr. Duryea, do I have permission to talk with your daughter privately?”

“What would you ask her that you don’t want us to hear?” objected Maggie.

Mustang’s surprise that either of the pair would actually rise to her defense stunned her.

“Nothing, ma’am,” Quincy assured the woman. “It’s just, sometimes youngsters are more willing to speak freely without... without...”

Joe shot off the recliner, waving Maggie toward the master bedroom. “It’s getting on to dinner time, so don’t be too long.”

Quincy got to his feet and watched the couple withdraw. Once the door slammed, reflecting her father’s disgust, he resumed his position.

Mustang took the initiative, propped now on the oak coffee table. “No games, doc. Tell me what you want to know, and I’ll do my best to answer.”

“Thanks, that’s very helpful.”

“No problem.”

“Thing is: I like to be very thorough when performing an autopsy, especially when the death is suspicious.”

“You think Uncle Oliver’s death was suspicious?” she echoed. “Like, somebody killed him?”

“Not necessarily.” He paused. “I want to explain in terms you’ll understand.”

“Go ahead.”

“Reverend Duryea showed definite signs of congenital heart failure, but...”

“But?”

“There were also indications of more recent damage, as if he’d been on the receiving end of an intense electrical shock.”

“You mean, the cops or the paramedics used the paddles on him?”

“No. The jail didn’t have a defibrillator available, and the paramedics called him in as deceased when they arrived.”

Quincy’s evasiveness irritated Mustang. “Be more specific, will you?”

“Analysis of his blood samples confirmed, less than a week earlier, he survived a myocardial infarction that should have killed him instantly, and my exam exposed an unusual singeing of his aorta.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I’ve spoken by phone with the chauffeur, who demanded immunity for past offenses in exchange for his testimony.”

Mustang bristled. “Oh, hell... You mean Hank?”

“An alias.”

Another of Oliver Duryea’s criminal posse. The teen exhaled deliberately. “And his allegations?”

“He swears you killed his boss, then revived him, right here in the kitchen.”

“You believe a convicted criminal?”

Quincy leaned forward, so close she could smell onions and pastrami on his breath. “My job is to gather all pertinent information. That also involves contacting other agencies - state and federal...”

“Oh, hell...”

She could imagine the tales FBI agent Ben Espinoza would relate about her, if given half a chance...

“I can’t substantiate anything, to be honest,” Quincy acknowledged. “But, then, there’s Sarah Gutierrez and Ted Wellington...”

“Junior,” she added.

“You’re admitting you know them, too?”

“They were Uncle Oliver’s main flunkies.”

“Who conveniently died before they could reveal what they witnessed?”

Mustang’s fingers flexed as she tried to curb her temper. “What they witnessed doesn’t amount to a hill of beans. Sarah was embezzling funds from Oliver’s ministry, and blackmailing him over his less-than-righteous behavior. Ted... well...”

“Somehow traveled to Dublin, then vanished, in a matter of hours - without a passport or ever stepping on a plane, according to the Irish police - during the short time Reverend Duryea was in residence.”

“He’d tired of Oliver’s scams.”

“In which he was complicit...”

“That bastard wanted Ted to seduce me, to force my dad into signing over the deed to the ranch. He wouldn’t let Ted refuse.”

Quincy’s left eyebrow arched. “Reverend Duryea held millions in assets. Why would he want...”

“He’d heard the old legend that a vein of gold runs through the north pasture.”

“Legend?”

“A joke his brother - my grandfather - used to prevent the place from being sold for back taxes decades ago.”

“You’d swear to this in court?” pressed Quincy.

“If you doubt me, ask my dad.”

A break in the stream of questions. “So, you hold Ted’s death - along with his driver - was purely accidental?”

“Sure.”

“How do you account for the fact the rental’s brakes had been sabotaged?” he countered.

“I knew nothing about it.”

“You did know Reverend Duryea had reason to take revenge on Ted?”

“Uncle Oliver sought revenge on anyone who crossed him. Sometimes with a fist, sometimes with more... lethal methods.” Mustang stretched her legs. “If you’d reviewed the prosecutor’s files, his methods exceed despicable.”

“Hmmm.”

“Is that it?” she queried. “Dad’s going to raise a stink if dinner isn’t ready by six.”

Quincy relinquished his place, grey orbs fixed on her youthful features.

“Just how *do* you create lightning without clouds?”

The 17-year-old gulped. “That’s a stupid thing to say.”

“Is it?”

She watched as he crossed the room.

“Are you going to be in school tomorrow?” he wondered.

“Probably not.”

He spun. “If they haul you in on a truancy violation, everything you’ve done over the past six months will come out under intensive interrogation.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“It’s not a threat. It’s a promise.” He plucked a cashmere overcoat off the wall rack. “Ted’s father, as well as Reverend Duryea’s publicity manager, his many creditors, and Miss Gutierrez’s brother want this matter expedited. I’m not willing to sign even one of the death certificates until I know the truth. They’re pressuring me, and I’ll be pressuring you until you crack.” He smirked. “My understanding is: when you get angry, you do horrible things. If that’s what it takes to prove my theory, I’ll do everything necessary to make you very, very angry.”

“You’ve already made a good start,” she hissed. “But you’re wasting your time, and the taxpayer’s dollars.”

Quincy threw the steel-reinforced panel wide, allowing a chill breeze to catch Mustang, rustling her hair. As he stepped onto the stoop, she scurried over and used her shoulder to secure the door, collapsing with a shudder.

Her options were limited in this instance. To bare her soul to a scientist would be worse than letting the FBI use her to their own purpose. If he learned her secrets, Quincy would, no doubt, treat her like a research project.

While ruminating on this dilemma, Maggie and Joe appeared.

“Well?” snapped her father.

“Well, nothing.”

“What did you tell him?”

“Nothing.” She shuffled toward the kitchen. “There was nothing to tell. Uncle Oliver died of a heart attack. Ted died in a car wreck. Sarah was killed by the police.”

Maggie extracted a package of hamburger from the refrigerator and dumped the ground beef in a skillet on the stove, fat crackling as Joe sank on the recliner, using a remote to switch on the evening news.

So much for her parents’ concern about her well-being.

II

That blustery Wednesday morning, Mustang dragged herself to the kitchen, jeans and purple flannel shirt askew. She nibbled on a small bowl of oatmeal across the table from her father, who devoured fried eggs, bacon and toast.

Refilling his mug with steaming coffee, Maggie drawled, “Hurry up, hon, or you’ll miss the bus.”

Irate, Mustang licked her spoon and carried the dishes to the sink. She had no intention of trekking to the road to catch a ride to school. Her parka already warm due to the proximity of the coat tree to the stove, she grabbed her backpack and slipped out the door.

The barn, too, provided warmth, thanks to a heater suspended from the rafters. Loading a metal bucket with oats, the teen filled Heartbeat’s trough and topped off his water as the skeleton crew of ranch hands prepped snowmobiles for a jaunt around the pastures to break ice off 100-gallon steel tanks and replenish the stock’s hay supply.

Mustang navigated the icy gravel drive to the bunkhouse, the smoky odor inflaming her nostrils. She intended to use the phone, determined her parents wouldn't overhear the conversation.

The thin directory, covering three counties, might be two years old, but government offices seldom changed their numbers. She flipped pages and ran a nervous index finger down the columns, snatching the receiver off its base and punching the keypad.

"Good morning, Prosecutor's Office," chirped a pleasant soprano through crackling on the line.

Mustang inhaled to calm herself. "Neal Evans, please."

"One moment."

It startled the girl that her name wasn't required to connect with this official, nor the purpose of her request. A few bars of Bach filled her ear before a click, a pop, a crash and, "Shit."

Fumbling with the instrument, an annoyed masculine, "Evans."

"Mr. Evans, this is Must... er, Elizabeth Duryea."

He responded, "Excuse me, Miss Duryea. I dropped the phone. Just goes to show how difficult it is to eat a bagel, drink tea, and read a brief at the same time." A weak chuckle didn't dispel the tension. "I'm due in court in fifteen minutes. What can I do for you?"

Feeling rushed disrupted Mustang's train of thought. "I... had a question about..."

"Please, go ahead."

"Um... the medical examiner came to the ranch yesterday. A Doctor Quincy."

"Good man. He's investigating the recent deaths..."

"That's what he said. Somehow, he thinks I'm responsible."

"Aren't you?"

The teen realized she'd been mistaken to pursue the matter.

Her silence warranted Evans' "Are you still there?"

"Yes," she mumbled. "Why would he..."

The prosecutor cleared his throat. "He obviously didn't tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"Our investigation into Oliver Duryea's crimes has sparked a nationwide media frenzy. We've had to offer immunity to certain members of the ministry's staff..."

"The ones with rap sheets as long as your arm?"

An alarmed, "How'd you..."

“Sarah and Hank, the chauffeur, both let slip about their prior... activities. I can only guess the hiring process was less than... legal.”

“Very perceptive.” The sound of Evans sipping tea and smacking his lips made Mustang cringe. “It came to our attention one of the videographers set up a hidden camera in your house during dinner the first night of their visit...”

“Why in hell would he do that?”

“Seems he was under contract with a Hollywood production company to film Reverend Duryea for a promotional documentary, and a second for a ‘behind-the-scenes’ exposé on Duryea’s seamier side. As a bonus, the lens captured certain... confrontations.”

“Oh, hell...”

“To put it mildly.”

“He didn’t have time to erase anything before... being arrested?”

“Brought in for interrogation, though he and his associates will be extradited to Florida to face federal extortion charges.”

“You’ve seen what he recorded?”

“Oh, yeah.”

Mustang shuddered at Evans’ tone. Talk about a scandal...

“I’m sorry, Miss Duryea, I’ve got to cut this short. Why don’t you stop by my office after school? I should be finished with the day’s proceedings, and I can show you...”

“I’ll be there.”

Hearing the school bus brakes squeal, she plopped the handset on its cradle and rushed outdoors.

Six hours of classes passed in a blur at Canyon Creek Junior-Senior High. Her attendance so sketchy, she had no idea what assignments the teachers had specified, or which textbooks were needed. She felt her heart pounding in sync with the clocks, and feared this emotional turmoil could bring the roof crashing on their heads.

Sleet assailed her cheeks as she hiked from the campus after the final bell to City Hall. Shaking herself like a wet dog, puddles made the lobby tile quite treacherous. When the woman who followed her inside slipped and bumped the stair railing, a mere word instantly dried the surface.

Agile legs mounted the flight in twos, reading plaques beside frosted glass doors until shivering digits turned the brass knob on the correct suite.

Seeing the brunette behind the maple desk caused the teen to repress a laugh. The assistant’s perky voice didn’t match her aging figure. “May I help you?”

“Mr. Evans is expecting me.”

“He’s in a meeting...”

Mustang scowled. She’d missed the bus home, and tromping ten miles in this weather would be a real pain.

The intercom buzzed. The woman flipped a switch and Evans’ baritone asked, “Is that Miss Duryea?”

Mustang nodded.

“Yes, sir,” responded the assistant.

“Send her in.”

A gold and diamond adorned finger pointed left. Steeling herself for whatever lay beyond, the girl pitched over the threshold when solid pine wrenched inward.

Six executive-style leather chairs surrounded a polished oblong conference table. Dr. Quincy occupied one; Evans resumed his place opposite, waving the girl to the far end.

That’s when she realized they were viewing video on a screen suspended from the ceiling.

“Oh, hell...”

“Indeed, Miss Duryea,” greeted Quincy. “Do you care to explain?”

Her ignorance genuine, she replied, “Explain what?”

Pointing a remote at the equipment cart, Evans rewound the tape. “You recognize your kitchen?”

A reluctant, “Yes.”

“You recognize that individual?” he prodded.

Oliver Duryea, his hirsute square jaw and bulk unmistakable, shielded his eyes from a blinding flash through the window, then approached the door, bellowing, “Murderer!”

“Oh, hell...”

Mustang didn’t need video to relive that scene. The hypocritical preacher had just witnessed the lightning bolt that transported Ted Wellington, Jr., to Ireland at her behest. Duryea had rushed onto the snow-covered hill - out of frame - then Mustang stomped inside, plucking the ringing phone off the wall to speak with Ted, already in trouble across the Atlantic.

The call ended, Mustang was accosted by Sarah Gutierrez, who confessed to blackmailing her employer and creatively redirecting millions in donations into her own pocket.

Duryea, pursuing his great-niece, erupted. Suddenly rendered immobile, he could only watch as Mustang convinced Sarah to flee in all haste.

The tawny-maned vixen scurried on stiletto heels through the front door. Mustang's anger visibly increasing, she directed her attention to this unwelcome relative, who towered above her.

The damned built-in microphone on the camera caught every syllable with astonishing Dolby clarity.

Maggie and Joe appeared, the latter defending the family honor with raised fists and ordering Oliver off the premises before the couple made a dignified exit.

Released from his invisible restraints, the elder Duryea seized the teen and shook her violently. She retaliated, the method confidential. Duryea's blue eyes went funny and he collapsed in a heap on the braided area rug. She bent to check his pulse: nothing.

Hank appeared, sharing news of his boss' congestive heart failure. The pair debated who would alert the coroner, both refusing. The image showed Mustang stroking Duryea's beard and the deceased bolting upright and sucking a lungful of air.

Evans paused the video. He and Quincy glared at auburn tresses dangling over the girl's face, hiding her agonized expression.

"Well?" the prosecutor ventured.

"Well, what?"

Quincy interjected, "I have to be back in Helena by six. Show her the rest."

"The rest of what?" she retorted.

Evans circled the table and switched tapes in the machine. Side-by-side images of Mustang being questioned at the jail and Duryea in the holding cell filled the screen.

She swallowed. "What's this?"

"Surveillance footage."

Concentrating on regulating her respiration, she remained confident she could not be implicated in her great-uncle's death.

Until...

The playback froze at the exact moment Duryea leapt off the concrete bench and clutched his chest. In the coinciding frame, Mustang idly scratched her nose.

"There!" Quincy shouted in triumph, skilled digits thrust at her.

She countered, "There, what?"

"That's when you murdered him!"

"Excuse me?"

"Your seemingly innocuous motion activated an electrical pulse, triggering your uncle's heart failure."

A disdainful guffaw reverberated around the chamber. “That’s insane!”

Evans, astonishingly, concurred with Mustang’s assessment. “You’re a scientist, Quincy. The kid was searched head to toe by the police when they picked her up. She had no equipment that could generate such a current...”

The medical examiner thumped his fists on the grained surface. “It’s the only thing that makes sense!”

“What about a natural death?”

“The evidence doesn’t corroborate that conclusion.”

Mustang’s elbows on the table, she buried her face in her hands. “Speak in English, for Pete’s sake.”

He rolled the chair beside her, nose inches from hers, his declaration scarcely audible. “Two words, Miss Duryea: Jack Parsons.”

Green orbs widened, and she sensed a failure to mask her emotions.

“What did you say?” asked Evans.

Quincy slid a business card, print side down, toward her. “Nothing,” he stated. “I’ve got to go.”

Hoisting his cashmere overcoat off the sideboard, the forensic pathologist departed, leaving Evans and Mustang to contemplate each other.

“Well, I never expected that reaction,” conceded the prosecutor.

Mustang, frankly, had. “Are we done?”

“A few more questions.”

She sighed. A wild animal, so cornered, would have already lashed out at its tormentors, shredding their hides. “Get on with it, please.”

“When we spoke on the phone, I mentioned our investigation into Reverend Duryea’s crimes...”

“That’s old news.”

“We’re not the only ones pursuing irregularities in his ministry’s operations. The Internal Revenue Service is trying to track his bank accounts and investments, but are having difficulty...”

“I thought those guys knew everything about everybody,” she snickered.

“So did I, to be frank. Rumors have it the majority of the ministry’s funds were deposited in Swiss banks, which can’t be touched...”

It took a few moments for Mustang to grasp the implications of Evans’ assertion. “You’re saying, you don’t have the account numbers, or know who has authorized access?”

A feeble grin.

“You - or they - have checked his files?”

“With a fine-toothed comb. Nothing.”

“What about his will? Who’s his heir?”

“He didn’t leave a will that we’ve discovered.”

“Oh, hell...”

Evans continued, “With Ted Wellington and Sarah Gutierrez both dead - who would most likely be privy to those details - we’re stumped.”

“The briefcase?”

“Unfortunately, no.”

Mustang kicked back on the leather upholstery. “That doesn’t figure. So many incriminating documents - kept there for safe keeping, supposedly... If he ran into some emergency, how could he get his mitts on ready cash?”

“Very astute, Miss Duryea.”

“Thanks.” Her brow furrowed, she ran a mental video through her head, particularly the conversations with Ted regarding Jack Parsons’ journals, which he’d so desperately wanted to read.

When she’d reclaimed them from Duryea’s briefcase, where Ted had hidden them beneath a stack of pornographic magazines, she’d never checked inside the battered covers.

What if...

“Take me home, please,” she requested.

“What, now?”

“I think I know where the account numbers are stashed.”

“Somewhere in your house?”

Tangled locks bobbed affirmatively.

Evans consulted his Rolex wrist watch. “Okay. It’s past quitting time, anyway.”

The nondescript white Chevy Impala didn’t handle snow-packed country roads too well. Mustang clutched the dashboard in fear as the driver fought to keep tires on the pavement when rounding treacherous curves.

Finally parked on the gravel drive, she tugged Evans’ arm when he moved to alight from the vehicle.

“Stay here. I... don’t want to upset my parents again.”

“Then, how...”

“I’ll bring the information out to you.”

“Promise?”

“Sure. What would I do with a couple hundred million dollars?”

He caught the sarcasm and acquiesced, leaving the motor running and heat on high as she gingerly crept from the car around the side of the dwelling to her unlocked bedroom window.

More careful climbing over the sill this time, Mustang tip-toed to her closet, pushing aside flannel shirts, blouses and sweaters hung on the pole. She groped along the rear wall, prying loose a square section of drywall, behind which Jack Parsons' journals were concealed.

She'd accidentally left them on the floor the day Oliver Duryea and his entourage arrived and Sarah, not knowing their sentimental value, had consigned them to Ted's tender care.

In the dimness, Mustang rifled hand-written pages of each volume. Toward the middle section of the third, a folded sheet fluttered to her feet.

"Bingo!" she whispered.

Retracing her steps, only delaying long enough to scan the sheet, Mustang surrendered it to Evans, impatiently drumming the steering wheel as classic rock blared on the radio.

"You've earned our gratitude, Miss Duryea," he praised. "If there's ever anything I can do..."

"You can get Doctor Quincy off my back."

"That... might not be feasible."

"Why?"

"He's sworn an oath to find the cause of death for every case in his charge. He's like a hound on the scent, not satisfied until he uncovers the irrefutable truth."

"And you give credence to that garbage about me twitching my nose and causing Uncle Oliver to cast off his mortal coil?"

Evans shrugged. "I don't know, but I'm positive Quincy is the best at what he does."

The passenger side window raised automatically, and the vehicle shifted into reverse.

Mustang didn't move until the Impala vanished past the line of trees along the road.

"Oh, hell."

III

By 6:00 am Thursday, malfunctioning technology had rendered all existing copies of the videographer's illicit recording and jail surveillance footage unviewable. Dozing sporadically through the night, Mustang Duryea dreamed of VHS tapes piled and set ablaze; she thawed herself as they congealed into abstract sculptures.

Given her command over the natural elements, her wish came true.

Prosecutor Neal Evans, notified of this loss of evidence, wrote it off to obsolete wiring in the Canyon Creek City Hall. He'd only agreed to the previous day's farcical meeting in an effort to get a recalcitrant teen to divulge facts about her dead uncle, not because Dr. Quincy had a bee in his bonnet over elusive non-physical factors in that death.

The tapes would never have been submitted in court, or even at the coroner's inquest. Whatever the cause of Duryea's cardiac arrest, federal agents were more than pleased to receive the bank account list.

They even proposed Evans be honored with a commendation.

For her part, Mustang reveled in the contentment of Heartbeat plodding along packed snow trails toward the north pasture - two of the ranch hands down with the flu - chisel and hammer in the pocket of her parka so she could crack thick ice on the troughs.

A pleasant - albeit chilly - diversion from the incessant angry banter between her parents.

An excuse to not attend school.

Quincy might find her roaming those halls. Here, she was safe.

Still, his allusion to Jack Parsons gnawed at her; her stomach still knotted from their initial encounter nearly 48 hours prior.

The medical examiner could not be privy to Parsons' real story: the faked explosion in a Pasadena garage, his enforced exile at Boleskine House in the Scottish Highlands, and manipulated execution by her hand during a bizarre ritual, a wooden picnic table serving as an altar.

Nonetheless, Quincy definitely wielded some clout on a regional level, to the point three Montana State Police cruisers waited on the gravel drive when she returned from her circuit well past noon.

A half-dozen uniformed officers emerged from the vehicles, sidearms drawn and aimed at her, as Heartbeat trotted into the clearing near the corral.

"Oh, hell..."

Reining her mount, she swung onto the ground and led the pinto toward the barn.

"Hands up!" barked a sergeant, wiry and flushed.

She spat, "Get stuffed."

As she sauntered past them, not one dared impede her progress.

She presumed they'd been warned of her... unpredictability.

Heartbeat safe in his stall, oats and water topped off, she perched the tooled leather saddle on its stand and slid the metal door closed along its rollers.

The cops had followed her, forming a semi-circle ten feet distant, weapons at the ready.

“Okay, what?” she challenged.

“We have a warrant for your arrest,” announced the sergeant.

“On what charge?”

“Obstruction of an official investigation.”

She jammed her hands in the pockets of her parka; the squad simultaneously flinched.

“Were you told I’m armed and dangerous?” she puzzled.

“No, just... dangerous.”

She propped herself against an iron hitching post. “If I comply, where will you take me?”

“The State Crime Lab in Missoula.”

“You’re joking, right?”

The squad commander’s pursed lips indicated otherwise.

A corporal beside him holstered his pistol and unclasped a set of handcuffs from his belt.

“Really?” Mustang snorted. “You want to waste your time?”

“It’s standard operating procedure.”

She extended her arms, and the shackles snapped around her skinny wrists. The patrolman paused long enough to inspect the scars on her palms, before she flipped them downward and the manacles plopped in the snow.

“She’s some sort of magician,” muttered the rookie furthest from the action.

Their superior instructed, “Put her in my car.”

Seated on an upholstered bench, a grate dividing the back from the front compartment, Mustang glanced at the house. These men must’ve cleared the arrest with her parents or, at least, informed them of their intentions, she being a minor. Knowing the couple, she entertained no hope they would interfere, or follow in their Chevy Suburban to post her bond.

A two-hour excursion west dragged into three, thanks to less than passable road conditions. The bumpy surface made Mustang queasy, though she managed to complete the journey without succumbing to bouts of nausea.

The crime lab - a glorified clinic - boasted the latest equipment for determining how and why an individual died. County coroners across the state, themselves not trained in forensic pathology, sent bodies from their jurisdictions to this facility, where professionals performed the autopsies.

Mustang shambled between the rookie and the corporal along a brightly lit corridor to Dr. Quincy's office. If they'd inquired, she would've declared her fear of the man who shouted, "Come in," through the hollow door.

"Here she is, doc," hailed the trim corporal. "You need us to hang around?"

He rose from a battered swivel chair at the faded green desk - a gentleman, despite his frustration. "No, thanks."

The police retreated, leaving Mustang to lean against a badly wallpapered surface, jaws clenched.

"You're a real piece of work, Miss Duryea," Quincy pronounced, sinking on the lumpy cushion. "Those poor guys tried to chase you down at the high school, only to discover another of your infamous absences. Then, they checked with your mom, who hadn't the slightest notion where you might be."

She grunted, "Sorry they were inconvenienced."

"Please, make yourself comfortable."

An inspection of the dirty beige armchair repulsed her, but she obliged, stretching her legs to present a more casual attitude.

"You know why you've been brought here?"

"No clue."

"Do you know anything about what we do?"

"Nada."

"Let me show you."

She remained stationary as he stood, shed his tweed jacket and donned a white thigh-length lab coat. "Well, come on," he insisted.

Vague memories of attending a family funeral as a child - getting lost at the mortuary while looking for the restroom and wandering accidentally into the embalming room - escalated her reluctance. "I really don't..."

His firm grasp on her right bicep brooked no opposition. "As long as you're here, I can't deny you the full tour."

Did she detect derision in his tone?

She shook off his grip. "Okay, okay."

No more had they meandered through a lab featuring electron microscopes, racks of vials, petri dishes and beakers, needles and syringes, and technicians focused on tasks at hand, than Quincy ushered her through a set of double doors where a green sheet covering a human shape on a gurney occupied most of the floor space, cabinets lining the walls.

"You're kidding, right?" Mustang hedged.

“I never joke about my job.” He urged her toward the prone form, pulling aside the cover to expose Oliver Duryea’s face.

“You planned this?” shrieked the teen.

“Of course. I want to show you why I’m not satisfied with a coronary as the cause of your great-uncle’s death.”

She struggled futilely to escape, without success.

“Haven’t you taken biology, or anatomy, in school?” Quincy chided.

“You’ll be fascinated...”

Her hand over her mouth, she gagged, “I think I’m going to be sick.”

Searching for a sink, or a bucket, she backed against the counter, convulsing.

The pathologist took pity on her, guiding her to the janitor’s closet. Her knees gelatinous, she crashed on the tile and heaved but, not having eaten since breakfast, her muscles wrenched without expelling any substance.

Spasms easing after five minutes, Quincy offered his linen handkerchief to wipe her lips. Leading her from the cramped chamber, he lowered her onto a molded plastic chair.

“Deep breaths, Miss Duryea,” he advised. “Then, we’ll get started.”

Her usually confident contralto uttered a pitiable whine as she cowered in the corner. “Please, no.”

“Consider it a lesson in life, to make up for what you missed by playing hooky today.”

Yes, he was mocking her.

He’d concocted this fiasco to rile her, to induce the horrible deeds she perpetrated when she let anger have sway.

She wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of triumphing over her youthful inexperience. Summoned without verbal commands, nature reinforced her legs and allowed her to hold her head erect as she inched toward the gurney.

“I admire your tenacity,” Quincy commended, pulling protective gloves over his fingers. He drew aside the sheet and separated withered flesh surrounding an incision in the chest cavity. His descriptions of the tissues and their condition streamed matter-of-factly, halting when he lifted Oliver Duryea’s heart into the light.

“See this?” he queried.

A sterilized pointer highlighted darkened areas of the aorta.

“Yes,” gurgled Mustang.

“Those are burns. To the trained eye, it’s no different than if someone jabbed the artery with a hot poker fresh from a blacksmith’s forge.”

“Weird.”

“Exactly.” Replacing the mass, Quincy closed the flesh and used his instrument to poke the skin. “Yet, there’s no discoloration or damage to the epidermis or the dermis.”

“What has that got to do with me?”

“We shall see.”

Removing the gloves, he led her through the doors to a vacant microscope and set of prepared slides. He placed one glass rectangle beneath the lens and adjusted the focus.

“Take a look,” he recommended.

She gazed through the eye piece at what resembled a drop of blood. Thus magnified, white cells far outnumbered the red. She straightened, flipping hair off her face. “I... don’t understand.”

“In basic terms, after a heart attack, the increase in the white blood cell count is proportionate to the severity of the damage. Your uncle’s white blood count far exceeds the aftermath of a fatal cardiac arrest.”

“Which means?”

“He had two very serious episodes, in a matter of days.”

“Again, what has that got to do with me?” repeated Mustang.

“The video proved you revived him - somehow - after the first attack killed him. Then, you engineered the second attack when he refused to repent.”

“But, if he had congestive heart failure, as Hank told me...”

“He did, according to his physician of record back east. Whatever you did to him, however, reversed his condition, as Doctor Bascombe’s EKG results confirmed. Yet, what lies on that table in the other room is a drastically enlarged organ, caused by years of untreated hypertension.” He placed unyielding hands on her shoulders, baritone menacing. “Just how do you explain that?”

She met his stern visage. “Beats me.”

Whether intentional or a manifestation of his own escalating aggravation with the teen, Quincy’s right hand raked her cheek, propelling her into the counter, overturning a Bunsen burner and box of test tubes. Pain coursing through her upper torso from the impact against the sharp edge, she stiffened as adrenaline overrode her self-control.

Every glass container in the chamber shattered, as if on cue. Shards flew in all directions; technicians ducked or fled, shielding their heads from flying projectiles with their arms. By the time the turmoil subsided, more than half required medical attention for deep gashes and minor lacerations to their hands and faces.

She whirled, sputtering, toward her terrified captor, rivulets of blood trickling down his chin and neck. “You are one idiotic son of a bitch. Is this what you were so anxious to see?”

His jaw gaped; he uttered no sound.

Staff converged on the lab, performing triage on the injured. When a Dr. Bygraves - as embroidered on his lab coat - assessed Quincy’s condition, he pronounced his colleague “catatonic, in a state of extreme shock.”

“Serves him right,” grumbled Mustang.

She allowed Bygraves to examine her; he marveled the teen had not so much as a scratch.

“Lucky, I guess,” she declared.

Paramedics arrived to transport the critically injured to the hospital; a burly pair lowered Quincy onto their gurney, covering him with a thin blanket. “Are you coming?” one of them urged Mustang.

She grunted. “I hardly know the man.”

They were prevented from wheeling him into the corridor due to a veritable traffic jam. During the lull, the girl kicked aside sharp fragments on the linoleum and squatted beside the prostrate pathologist.

“I could let you die, you know,” she murmured in his ear. “But, unlike my opinion of Uncle Oliver, I believe you’re - essentially - a good man, with a passion for your work. You’ve got to let go of the notion I caused that hypocrite’s death and sign the paperwork so he can be shipped back to the hell he came from. All I’ll say about it is that I’ve a tendency to screw up, not being used to... used to...”

Quincy’s left pinky twitched beneath the tan cloth as the medics maneuvered him into the queue of beds moving toward the exit. Mustang reached beneath, cradling his digits in hers for a scant second.

Almost mimicking the scene recorded by the videographer’s hidden camera, he jerked vertical on the uncomfortable mattress and blinked at her, confused.

His attendants halted and bent to check his vital signs - all normal.

“What the hell...” groaned the shorter of the white-clad pair.

“What’s going on?” Quincy barked, planting his loafers on the floor. A scan of the lab jarred his memory. “What a disaster!”

Mustang offered her arm as he regained his balance.

“You sure you’re okay?” the older medic queried.

Quincy waved them away. “I’m fine. There are others who need your attention.”

Left among the clutter, the two took each other’s measure.

“I’m... sorry,” came the man’s eventual apology.

She shrugged acceptance.

“Can you fix... this?”

“Sure, but do you want that? No fewer than forty people witnessed it, and to just...” She snapped her fingers.

“But, how to explain it?”

“Earthquake. Sonic boom from a fighter jet flying too low. Whatever.”

Together, they strolled along the side hall to his office. He practically fell onto his chair, exhausted. She remained standing.

“Are you done with me?” she pondered.

Resigned, “I suppose.” He brightened. “Can’t you tell me how... why...”

“If I did, I’d have to kill you.”

She meant the remark as a joke, before comprehending the fate of those who discovered her secret. Oliver Duryea, Ted Wellington, Jr., and Sarah Gutierrez had an inkling of the truth, and they were dead, unable to share their insights with the authorities.

Quincy, in the meantime, didn’t relish the notion. He exchanged his lab coat - splattered with the blood of those nearest during the debacle - for his tweed jacket suspended on the curved wood coat rack. “C’mon, I’ll drive you home.”

IV

No more had the Ford Taurus station wagon bearing the Missouri state crest pulled into evening traffic than Mustang’s stomach growled. Dr. Quincy heard the gastric protest and chuckled.

“Didn’t they feed you on the drive up here?” he wondered.

“I haven’t eaten since breakfast.”

“Well, I don’t want you dying of starvation on the way, so let’s stop for a bite.”

“Sounds good.”

Drewry’s Bar and Grill a converted storefront in the heart of Missoula, Quincy couldn’t deny being a regular. He and Mustang settled in a circular booth; gold naugahyde stitched seats and speckled laminate table smacked of economy, despite the outrageous prices on the plastic coated menu the girl plucked from between ceramic salt and pepper shakers painted with cartoon roosters.

A jean and pink striped t-shirt clad waitress delivered two draft beers on a brown cork-inlaid tray and set the mugs before the pair.

“Thanks, Cindy,” Quincy stammered, embarrassed.

Mustang sniffed, shoving the beverage aside. “You bring a lot of gals here, eh?”

“When I get an evening off.”

“Keeps you busy, this forensic science?”

“People die every day.”

“You enjoy a good mystery?”

“Since I was a kid. Started reading Sherlock Holmes in grade school.”

“But decided you wanted to be Watson?”

He grimaced contritely.

“Nothing wrong with that,” she chided.

Cindy reappeared, pad and pencil at the ready.

“Club sandwich,” Quincy ordered.

Mustang added, “Grilled cheese and tomato soup.”

“You want something different to drink?”

“Ice water would be grand.”

“Right,” the waitress confirmed, veering toward the kitchen behind the bar, where less than ten patrons sipped drinks, national news blaring on the television above shelves filled with whiskey and other liquor bottles.

Quincy nursed his beer.

“Go ahead,” urged Mustang. “Ask your question.”

Dabbing froth from his lips with a paper napkin, the medical examiner leaned toward her. Before he could speak, however, the bartender signaled to him.

“Excuse me a minute,” said this distinguished gentleman, crossing rough-hewn boards to the brass trimmed bar.

Mustang didn’t need to strain her ears to hear the two men, covering her mouth to conceal a smile.

“She’s awfully young for you, isn’t she, Quince?”

“Christ, Ben, she’s consulting on a case.”

The establishment’s owner railed, “A kid?”

“A very unique kid.”

They studied at each other for a split second before Ben punched his friend’s shoulder in dismissal. Quincy returned to the table with an apology.

His companion waited patiently until he took a long swig of beer and cleared his throat. “How are you connected with Jack Parsons?” he finally blurted.

“How do *you* know about Jack Parsons?” she parried.

He placed his palms flat on the laminate, a gesture of sincerity. “Fine. Let’s both put our cards on the table.” Grey eyes almost twinkled. “Before I was born, my dad was a private detective in southern California, contracted to investigate

certain... employees of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory - at risk of losing their security clearance, and costing the company millions of dollars in government funding.”

“One of them being Jack Parsons,” supplied Mustang.

“Then, you *do* know...”

“For now, I’m still noncommittal. Please, go on.”

“Dad was tasked with infiltrating Parsons’ inner circle of... freaks and geeks. In his early twenties and curious, he was invited to move into the Parsonage in Pasadena and join in the festivities.”

The teen croaked, “I’ll bet he grew up fast.”

“He spent six months confined to a psychiatric ward after he submitted his report to the JPL security team.”

“How so?”

“To his dying day, he couldn’t rationalize much of what he experienced inside that old house, and beyond. Nightly orgies, liquor and drugs flowing freely... and the rituals...”

“Rituals?” she echoed.

“Dad had difficulty describing Parsons and his ilk clothed in elaborate vestments, chanting gibberish phrases around an altar where a naked woman lay.”

Similar to Mustang’s own interaction with the occultist, *sans* nudity.

“One specific ritual was held at the Aroyo Seco, where Parsons and his Suicide Squad performed their early experiments with solid jet fuel. Dad told me rain fell from a cloudless sky, microbursts of wind uprooted trees, and a pillar of fire shot from the sand without any form of accelerant.”

His reasoning became clear in that instant.

“Ah! You think, because I was outside when the video captured that flash, I was performing the same type...”

“Weren’t you?” Quincy drawled. “Oliver Duryea saw you do something that made him accuse you of murder. An animal sacrifice?”

She shook her head in disgust. “Anyone who engages in such horrors is sick and twisted.”

“Glad to hear that,” came the relieved comment.

Cindy delivered their entrees and sidled toward newly arrived customers.

Quincy removed toothpicks holding the quarters of his sandwich together and took a huge bite from one section. “I didn’t realize how hungry I was.”

Mustang inhaled the soup’s aroma, her appetite diminished by the discussion topic. Best to get it over and done. “You were saying?”

“Dad saw Parsons manipulate energy, unseen forces. He could move objects with his mind, levitate people, trigger ground tremors measuring up to six on the Richter scale, liquify metal... He even attempted to create what he called the Moonchild, a being capable of initiating Armageddon, the end of all existence.”

At least, Quincy’s knowledge of the matter originated in legitimate sources.

“So, your father recommended Parsons’ security clearance be rescinded?” surmised the teen.

“Indeed.” He drained the mug. “A year later, Parsons died.”

Or, not - though Mustang didn’t speak that truth aloud.

“So, how did you come by... these abilities?”

A spoon absently stirred reddish liquid in the porcelain bowl. “My maternal grandmother... was one of Parsons’ groupies.”

“She taught you?”

“No. She died two weeks after I moved east to live with her. Six months ago, in fact.”

“So?”

“So, what?”

“That’s not enough...”

Tossing her napkin atop her plate, Mustang slid from the booth.

“Where are you going?” Quincy demanded.

“The ladies’ room. We need to get going, or I won’t be home until midnight.”

He hailed Cindy, who brought the check, dismayed at the uneaten fare. “Everything okay?”

“I’ve got to take her home.” He scribbled his signature on the receipt. “It’s late.”

“Your tab’s getting pretty hefty, Quince,” advised the waitress.

“Tomorrow is pay day. I’ll cover it when I stop by for lunch.”

“Ben will hold you to that.”

“I know, I know.”

Distracted, Quincy grabbed his overcoat and strode toward the door. Mustang lingered beneath the tattered canopy, studying the stars.

“There’s more to your story...” he hinted.

“That would put both our lives at risk.”

Holding the Taurus’ passenger door open as she dropped onto the stained bucket seat, he bent to her. “Would it make a difference if I told you Ted Wellington made a phone call to a certain party before... he mysteriously wound up in Dublin?”

Mustang's head whipped right, her nose bumping his. "Huh?"

Quincy recoiled. "The individual on the receiving end offered him five million bucks for Jack Parsons' hand-written journals, which Ted purported to have in his possession."

"Our phones are *tapped*?" she squealed, temperature rising. Damn that Ben Espinoza!

"Easy, girl, easy. It was the other guy's phone that was tapped. A researcher at a prominent Midwestern university, who's suspected of illegally dealing in antiquities."

"Oh, well, that's better."

"They're yours, though, aren't they?"

"What's mine?"

"Parsons' journals."

She averted her gaze.

"Is that why you went to see your grandmother before she died? To retrieve them?"

She tired of his harangue. "Think what you like. Please, take me home."

"Will you let me see them?"

"If I wouldn't let Ted Wellington, why would I let you? You'd feel duty-bound to surrender them to the Feds."

Quincy's innate ethical integrity and his knowledge of her association with Jack Parsons could not become a factor in his findings regarding the deaths of Oliver Duryea, Sarah Gutierrez or Ted Wellington, Jr.

He'd just sealed his fate.

And hers.

The power to take life - and restore it - would prove a heavy burden for Mustang's narrow shoulders. She still hadn't come to terms with her ability to travel via lightning, to utter a casual comment for nature to instantly fulfill. Prospects of a career tending horses on her father's ranch evaporated. She would need to practice nonstop vigilance to prevent any future impulsive accidents...

Or, remember to dispose of the bodies in such a way they left no trace.

She shivered at the heartless thought.

"You okay?" Quincy asked, buckling himself onto the driver's seat and turning the key in the ignition.

"Just cold."

In more ways than one, to be sure.

"Don't worry, the heater will kick in soon."

The Taurus fish-tailing on ice - snow that had melted in the sunlight now refrozen on the pavement due to the drop in temperatures caused by clear skies releasing the day's accumulated warmth - thrust her back into the moment.

Quincy urged the vehicle along unlit roads at a snail's pace, country music playing on the radio. Mustang dreaded the prolonged journey, headlights providing limited illumination of potential hazards. At least, at this hour, the deer and other creatures should be hunkered down...

Downshifting as they approached an intersection, a test of the brakes caused no skid, to the driver's astonishment. "They must've sent out the salt trucks," he observed.

She wasn't going to disclose she'd ordered the asphalt to dry the entire distance to Canyon Creek so they could bring this ordeal to its logical conclusion.

As soon as he dropped her at the ranch...

Their speed gradually increased, Quincy glad road conditions had improved. "Miss Duryea..."

She stared out the side window at ominous blackness. "What?"

"A major part of my job involves trust."

"Eh?"

"The deceased's loved ones, many of whom strongly object to the idea of an autopsy, trust I'm not desecrating the body merely out of curiosity, but to find the truth about the cause of death. Once in awhile, the facts I uncover lead to progress in treating certain diseases, or initiate safety and prevention programs."

"Good for you."

"I value the trust people place in me, and would never consider violating it."

She glanced at him, his solemn profile visible by the light from the dashboard controls. She caught the implications of his declaration. "You're afraid I'm going to do to you what you think I did to Uncle Oliver."

"Hasn't that very thought crossed your mind?"

She slumped on the seat.

"I spent the decade after med school as a general practitioner. Everyone from infants to centenarians came through my exam room, and I took the time to talk with them, knowing it's not just the physical, but the mental and spiritual that contributes to overall health."

"Very wise."

"When the system of care began to change from quality to quantity, I opted to use my skills in a different way."

"So, you've been a medical examiner for, what, 15 years?"

“Just about.”

“You’re telling me this, why?”

“I want to assure you I won’t share anything you’ve confided to me with anyone.”

Mustang’s stomach gurgled, an oddly appropriate response. “What will you write on Uncle Oliver’s death certificate?”

“Cardiac arrest.”

“And how will you explain this hullabaloo to Neal Evans?”

“He knows I like to tie up all loose ends.”

“I won’t be subpoenaed for the coroner’s inquest?”

“There won’t be one.”

“But, you still want to see Jack Parsons’ journals.” A concise summary of his motives.

“Maybe someday. However they came into your hands, I expect they’ll be a source of insight and wisdom.”

The girl chuckled, once more scanning the dark landscape. “God, you are *petrified*.”

Silence reigned until the Taurus steered onto the familiar gravel drive. Mustang directed Quincy to park near the bunkhouse; she’d walk from there. If her parents discovered she’d been out until 3:00 am, they might just defy the norm and raise hell.

He caught her wrist before she alighted. “Tread softly through life, kiddo. Keep your eyes and ears open, and remember every day is an opportunity for growth.”

A bizarre farewell. She managed, “Thanks,” before creeping toward the shadow-bathed edifice.

Reversing toward the road, Quincy eased the station wagon past the trees.

The blizzard commenced shortly after Mustang’s head hit her pillow. By the time her alarm jangled at 6:30, 14 inches of snow had fallen, high winds causing white-outs and making travel treacherous.

School cancelled, the teen rolled over and dozed anew.

She trudged into the kitchen around noon. Maggie greeted her with the latest news.

“You know that strange man, Doctor Quincy, who visited Tuesday?”

“Yeah.”

“He died in a car wreck not far from here.”

Those words stunned Mustang into total consciousness. “What?”

“Around 3:30 this morning, he was driving up route 200, when his car hit a patch of ice on a curve and broke through the guardrail, going over the cliff.”

“Oh, hell...”

Trembling fingers ran through her disheveled auburn mop. She knew she hadn't caused this death. She knew it; she knew it...

Or, had she?

A disturbing recollection sent chills up her spine. The natural defenses she'd instigated when escaped mental patient Wilfrid Bailey, aka Jonas Fairchild, had been stalking her, had dissipated once she fell asleep.

Had the same happened in this instance? Did the roads refreeze as soon as she'd closed her eyes to rest?

“Oh, hell...” she lamented again.

Her stomach growled.

“You hungry, hon?” asked Maggie. “Help yourself to some cereal.”

Rare the occasion Mustang felt ill. For the second time in a week, she forced herself not to succumb to dizziness and nausea.

She failed, making a mad dash to the bathroom and slamming the door.