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opening extract from

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Sharon Siamon

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Mustang Mountain

Wild Horse

Sharon Siamon

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To Anne

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Chapter 1

Battles

The sleek black sports car pulled up outside the Blue Barn Stables. The doors opened and four people got out – two of them very squished from riding in the back seat.

Alison Chant and her mother paid no attention to the sadly rumpled pair who wriggled out behind them. They were too busy fighting.

Both were tall and dark, both had straight

backs and straight noses. Both were furious. Alison wore riding clothes, slim boots, close-fitting pants, a trim riding jacket. An expensive black riding helmet swung from her hand. Her mother, Marion, was dressed in a neat, well-fitted black suit. They could almost have been sisters, except there was a sag to Alison's young shoulders that didn't match her mother's stiff posture.

'You didn't prepare for the district finals properly, and you know it!' Marion Chant's tone was frigid.

'Oh, well as far as you're concerned, nothing is good enough. It wouldn't matter if I was out here riding twenty-four hours a day, it still wouldn't be enough.'

Becky Sandersen, Alison's cousin, and their friend Meg O'Donnell, exchanged embarrassed glances. 'C'mon,' Becky whispered, 'let's just go in.'

They gave a backwards, sympathetic glance at

Alison, as they headed for the stable door at Blue Barns.

'Sometimes I feel almost sorry for Alison.' Becky shook her honey-blonde curls. 'My Aunt Marion can be harsh.'

Becky and Alison were first cousins, and both were fourteen, but it would be hard to imagine two girls more different. Becky had grown up on ranches in the Rocky Mountains. She was lean and strong from fresh air and living outdoors. Her hair was blonde, instead of dark and her brown eyes seemed flecked with sunlight.

'I wish my aunt would just let up on Alison about the dressage competitions,' Becky sighed, as she and Meg headed for the tack room. 'Aunt Marion takes everything so seriously. Since I got here, two months ago, I don't think I've ever really heard her laugh. She hardly even smiles, just walks around with that sarcastic smirk on her face.'

Meg nodded. 'She's totally different from your

mom.' Meg had come to love Becky's mom, Laurie Sandersen, when she and Alison visited Becky's home in the Alberta Rockies. 'You must miss her.'

Becky gave a quick glance at the tall girl with the wide blue eyes that missed nothing. How typical of Meg to realise how homesick she was feeling. In fact, life with her aunt and uncle here in this suburb of New York would be next to unbearable without Meg. 'I even miss Mustang Mountain Ranch,' she said with a shaky laugh. 'Who would have thought I'd ever say that?'

When her parents had moved to the isolated Rocky Mountain ranch, Becky had thought her life had ended. Being thirteen in a place with no friends, towns, not even roads or a school was like a sentence. Then Alison and Meg had arrived, suddenly and unexpectedly. Over the past two summers, the three had become so close that Becky had come back to school with them for the winter.

Last autumn it had seemed like a perfect solution, Becky thought with a sigh, but this year was different. It was going to be a long, cold winter living in Alison's big stone house by the Hudson River with Alison like a black cloud, fighting her parents every step of the way.

Becky took her bridle off its hook and started for the tack room door just in time to see Alison stomp into the barn, her face slammed shut like a book. 'I'm not riding at all today, then,' she shouted over her shoulder to her mother. 'If you don't like it, that's too bad.' She strode down the central hall of the barn to her horse Duchess's stall and disappeared inside.

Becky exchanged a worried glance with Meg. What would happen now? They could hear Alison's mother talking to the stable owner in a low voice. 'I don't know what I'm going to do with her, Virginia. Roger and I are thinking of selling Duchess.'

Now the look Becky and Meg shared was one

of horror. Sell Duchess! Alison might be spoiled and difficult, she might rebel against her mother's constant demands to win trophies, but she loved her beautiful champion mare.

The stable owner's voice was equally low, but calmer. 'She's a lovely horse.'

'Yes, and she deserves the kind of rider who will put her best effort into winning, not someone who can't be bothered half the time.'

'I'm sure Alison does her best,' they heard Virginia murmur.

'That's just it.' Marion Chant's voice had an icy edge. 'She absolutely does not do her best. The horse is worth over fifty thousand dollars. It's not a good investment if Alison is not going to take competition seriously.'

'Development in dressage has its plateaus. Like every other kind of learning,' they could hear Virginia say.

'Of course, but this has nothing to do with a learning plateau. Alison's attitude is the problem.

We see it at home, in a thousand ways. She's lazy, rude and inconsiderate. I don't know what we're going to do with her!' There was a pause. 'I haven't decided yet, but if you hear of anyone looking for a good dressage horse, I hope you'll let me know.'

The two voices moved out of earshot. Becky and Meg gaped at each other. 'She wouldn't really sell Duchess?' Meg's blue eyes were troubled.

'She might.' Becky made a face. 'She might just do it to punish Alison.'

Alone with her horse, Alison took a couple of deep breaths, not wanting to frighten Duchess with her anger and frustration. 'How are you, old girl?' she whispered, leaning her head against Duchess's warm horse-fragrant cheek.

Duchess blew softly through her great nostrils and tossed her head gently, as if to answer. She

was a big horse, almost sixteen hands and strongly built, a Dutch warmblood. Alison knew she was lucky to have such a magnificent animal, but it wasn't Duchess's breeding and training she loved, it was the way Duchess nickered a 'hello' when she saw her, followed her in the paddock without being led, and seemed to know how she was feeling, like now.

'My mother thinks I don't try,' Alison whispered, brushing Duchess's forelock back and massaging the small white blaze on her forehead. But we know better, don't we, Dutch?' She remembered with a spurt of bitter anger, how it had been at that last dressage event. Duchess had not been feeling her best. As soon as Alison mounted her, she could feel that the mare was slightly 'off', not really sick, but just not able to focus. She knew, right then, they weren't going to win, so instead of pushing the big horse, she just lay back, gave her some slack and decided to enjoy the day.

They'd done a respectable job, and came fifth.

But of course, that wasn't good enough for her mother!

Alison reached in her kit bag for a soft brush and began to gently brush Duchess's glossy hide in circular strokes. It soothed the anger she felt remembering her mother's scorching words after the results were announced. It was no use telling her Duchess hadn't been feeling her best. 'You have to push her!' Marion Chant had raged in front of everybody. 'She's not a pet, she's a champion, and you have to make her be her best at all times, not just when she wants to win. Haven't I taught you anything?'

Yes, Alison thought bitterly, working her brush down Duchess's flank. You've taught me winning is the only thing that matters. Last summer, out at Mustang Mountain Ranch, she'd learned that other things were important – such as being kind to Duchess when she wasn't at the top of her form. That new Alison had struggled

to stay alive for a few weeks after they got back. But she could feel herself sinking into her mother's world again, where status and being the best were the only things that mattered.

'Sometimes, I really hate her,' Alison whispered to Duchess, ducking under her neck to brush her other side. 'If only Dad would take my side.' But her father was worried about business these days, and he and her mother were constantly battling. He seemed to have no time to even listen to her problems.

'If you're not riding, we're going home,' she heard her mother's voice say. 'I'm not wasting time while you sulk!' She looked up to see her mother's angry face.

'What about Becky's lesson?' Alison threw up her chin and faced her mother.

'She'll have to miss it.'

'That's not fair . . .' Alison flared.

'Well, you should have thought of that! Is it fair that I interrupt my day to drive you all the

way out here for nothing?' They glared at each other, neither giving in, then Alison turned away with a careless shrug.

'Goodbye, Dutch,' she murmured, kissing Duchess on the side of her head, and giving her face a last rub. 'See you Thursday.'

Meg watched the black Porsche turn down the stable drive towards the river and speed through the gate on to the main road. Meg could walk home from Blue Barns, but Alison and Becky lived on the other side of town, further along the Hudson River.

Meg turned back into the barn and walked down the row of stalls, stopping to rub the faces of the horses and working her way towards Duchess. The first time Meg had met Alison she was riding Duchess, right here at Blue Barns, and Meg had been awestruck at the picture of them. A perfect vision of a girl on a horse, like the kind

of thing Meg had been reading about and dreaming about since she was a little kid.

She stopped at Duchess's stall and the big horse thrust her nose out in greeting. 'Here, girl, I can at least turn you out and muck out your stall.' She gave the aristocratic nose a pat. 'I'd exercise you, too, if I didn't think Alison's mom would have a fit!' Alison would have done that, if she'd stayed. One of the best things about Alison was the way she loved her horse. Meg could no more imagine her without Duchess than . . . than myself without Silver, she thought with a pang and a shake of her long brown ponytail.

Silver was gone. The gangly white colt she'd rescued in a snowstorm, the beautiful horse she'd loved and nursed back to health had gone – back to his home stable in Maryland. For over a year she had looked after him, loved him, helped his leg heal after an accident. It had been almost like having her own horse. Almost, but



Meg had known that she couldn't keep Silver, and she was glad he was ready to begin his training as a jumper.

She just hadn't counted on how much she'd miss him.

She clipped a lead rope to Duchess's halter, opened the stall and led the tall chestnut to the wide doors at the other end of the barn. Some day I will have my own horse, Meg thought. I'll get a job and save every cent and find the perfect horse.

The vision of a red mustang, galloping across a mountain meadow, leaped into her mind. On his back was Thomas, the boy who had captured this wild horse to be the foundation of his herd. Meg sighed. Thomas and his mustang stallion were far away in the Rockies. Someday, she might see them again. In the meantime, she could help out at Blue Barns and earn enough to help pay for her lessons, and spend her time with the school horses and the boarders, like Duchess.

‘They couldn’t sell you.’ The sunlight gleamed on Duchess’s smooth hide, as glossy and bright as a new chestnut. ‘You belong here.’

