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Stardust Stables 1: A Star is Born

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chapter one

"Hey, Kami, and welcome!" Jack Jones, owner of Stardust stunt-riding stables, stretched out a hand.

Kami Cooper grinned back at him. "Hey," she murmured. She and her dad had made the two-hour drive from their home at Elk Creek. They'd dropped off her bags in the girls' living quarters, and then she'd waved her dad goodbye. Now, day one at the Colorado stables had kicked into action. Boy was she excited.

"Good timing," Jack told her. He was tall and lean, around forty years old and his face was creased into a broad, welcoming smile. "Lizzie's working some of our horses and riders in the round pen. Come take a look."

She followed him across the corral, past a low red barn and a row of wooden stalls towards a fenced arena.

"Hey, guys," Kami murmured to each of the ponies looking out over the stall doors – a pretty palomino, a high-class, bored-looking sorrel, a cute brown-and-white Paint and a beautiful light grey Quarter Horse with a long black mane.

As the ponies snickered at the newcomer, a boy at work in one of the empty stalls popped up his head. He was around fourteen, tall and slim, and wearing a pale blue T-shirt and a baseball cap with the peak reversed to protect the back of his neck from the fierce sun.

"Hey, Tom, meet Kami Cooper. Her folks run Elk Creek Guest Ranch a couple of hours south-west of here. She's joined us for the summer, so you'll be seeing plenty of her."

Tom nodded, then gave Kami a quick smile.

"Tom's a regular member of our team," Jack explained. "This is his second season here, along with his sister, Kellie. They live thirty minutes away, just outside Colorado Springs, so they get to work here at Christmas and weekends, too."

"So, how did Jack and Lizzie find you?" Tom came out of the stall, brushing straw from his jeans, and followed Jack and Kami to the round pen.

"I entered a contest in Clearwater County," Kami replied, looking away shyly. Tom's direct gaze and lazy drawl made her feel even more self-conscious than when she first shook hands with Jack. She blushed and swept her light blonde hair forward to hide her face.

"Lizzie was in the area scouting for talent," Jack explained. "The Clearwater show attracts some terrific junior riders. Lizzie saw Kami win the barrel-racing contest by a mile and thought she'd be a great addition to the team."

"Awesome! Which horse will she be riding?" Tom asked.

Jack shrugged. "I have no idea – that's Lizzie's deal."

"Just so long as it's not Legend," Tom joked. "I'll kill anyone who tries to take my palomino away from me!" He came up to Kami as they reached the arena fence, his grey eyes twinkling. "So you reckon you can make it as a stunt rider?"

"I don't know about that," Kami answered tentatively. This was all so new – the sunny corral that nestled at the foot of the mountains, the big old barn to one side and ranch house to the other, with the round pen on the near side of a fast-running creek. Beyond the creek there

was a green meadow where horses grazed. And now there was this gangly boy with a cheeky smile and cute sticky-out ears asking questions and grinning at her.

"Sure you can – you're the best young rider in your home county," Jack said to her. "Your dad told Lizzie they put you in the saddle at the age of two."

"But I don't know any stunts." Kami gasped as the three riders in the round pen galloped their mounts round the pen under Lizzie's instruction. "Not yet anyway." They came so close she could almost reach over the fence to touch them. She caught the smell of sweat and dust, felt the dirt kicked up by the horses' hooves sting her cheeks.

"Hey!" A girl in a pink shirt on a sorrel mare waved as she galloped by, seemingly super-glued to the saddle. Her glossy, long dark hair hung loose beneath her safety helmet and she wore shades to protect her eyes from the sun. Horse and rider in perfect harmony – it was beautiful.

"That's Alisa on Diabolo," Jack told Kami. "She's a pro. Watch and learn!"

"Hi there!" A second girl greeted Kami from the back of a dark bay Quarter Horse. Dressed in a yellow plaid

shirt beneath her blue body armour, she rode her pony bareback.

"Kellie and Dylan." Tom took over the introductions. "Kellie's my kid sister. She's thirteen."

"The same age as me." Kami watched with awe as Kellie suddenly switched from sitting to crouching on Dylan's hindquarters. Then she went from crouching to standing with arms spread wide.

"Lizzie's teaching them a new trick," said Tom.

Kellie and Dylan caught up with Alisa and Diabolo, then Kellie leaned sideways and shifted her weight across so that she stood astride the two ponies.

"Roman riding," Jack explained, watching Kami's amazed reaction. "Kellie's a natural stunt rider. Now take a look at Hayley on Cool Kid."

Kami switched her attention to the third horse and rider – a stocky little Paint ridden by a skinny girl with a long dark braid that made her look younger than the others. Her pony kicked up a cloud of dirt as she slid him to a stop. She sprang from the saddle and gave Cool Kid a tap on his hindquarters. The pony set off again at a trot. Hayley chased after him, came alongside, then vaulted back into the saddle.

"Think you can do that?" Tom asked with a grin.

Kami frowned and shook her head. These girls were seriously good. Now Lizzie called in other riders – a couple more girls and some boys, until there was a total of ten riders working their horses in the pen.

"You will, no problem," Jack told her kindly. "Everyone feels a little nervous at first. But you just have to put in the hours. Stunt riding is one part talent and three parts hard work."

Kami nodded as she watched riders fling themselves sideways, then hang from their saddles by their legs ("A drag," Tom explained), riders clinging to the saddle horn and throwing their weight forward towards their pony's head ("A front wing") – exciting, dangerous stunts that she was afraid she'd never learn.

"Lizzie, do you have time to introduce Kami to her pony?" Jack called out as his wife walked by.

"Hey, Kami!" Lizzie had been focused on teaching and hadn't noticed the new arrival. Now she came out of the round pen to greet her. "How was your journey? Did you drop off your stuff in the girls' quarters? You're rooming with Alisa – I'm sure she'll show you around. How about getting something to eat?"

"No, I'm good, thanks." Kami was glad to say hi to a familiar face at last. She recognized Lizzie from Clearwater – she was not tall, but very slim, with blonde hair tied back under a black Stetson and gold hoop earrings that added a touch of glamour to her western outfit of dark shirt, blue jeans and heeled boots.

"So, you're keen to meet the horse you'll be working with?" asked Lizzie, picking up immediately on Kami's anxiety.

"Yes, please."

Lizzie beckoned for Kami to follow and led the way across the corral towards the barn.

"Don't be nervous," she said, turning to Kami with a smile. "His name's Magic. You're going to love him."

★★★★★

"I'm never, never going to be that good!" Kami confided her fears to Magic after Lizzie had gone to the office to order more grain for the horses, leaving her alone with her new horse in his straw-lined stall.

Magic nudged her gently with his nose. He was the pale dappled grey with the long dark mane who she'd noticed in the stalls earlier that morning.

Now, close up, she saw that he had the biggest, gentlest brown eyes, the softest muzzle and the longest, thickest, glossiest mane. Lizzie had been right – for Kami it was love at first sight.

"You know it was tough leaving my pony, Columbine, behind," she said sadly. "She's back home in Elk Creek. I love her, too, of course. She's a gorgeous sorrel and I've known her since I was eight. But no way could I bring Columbine to Stardust because she's a working ranch horse and my folks need her. I won't see her again until I leave here in the fall. I'm sure going to miss her."

Magic gave her another nudge.

"OK, so I'm a decent rider," Kami confessed to him in a soft voice, trying to be positive. "But no way am I as good as Alisa, Kellie and Hayley. I'm no superstar."

The beautiful grey Quarter Horse rustled his feet in the straw.

Kami put her arms round his neck in the quiet warmth of his stall and sighed. "I just hope you're not going to be disappointed in me."

Magic turned his head and nuzzled her cheek. His soft nose tickled and she smiled. "Yeah, I hear you,"

she murmured. "You're telling me not to worry – you and me, we're a perfect fit!"

★★★★★

"So, Kami, how do you like your horse?" Alisa asked.

It was just after lunch and she, Hayley and Kellie had split off from the boys and invited Kami to join them at the cold drinks machine behind the tack room. They took cans of Coke, paper cups and ice from the machine, then sat together round a rough wooden table, under the shade of a big yellow sun umbrella.

"I love him," Kami sighed. The drink was cool and fizzy and she needed it after two hours scooping up horse manure in the baking hot corral with Tom and two other boys named Zak and Ross.

"I can't believe my brother had you scooping poop," Kellie remarked. The hatband of her safety helmet had left a red mark round her forehead. Like Tom, she had clear grey eyes. "That's the worst job in the world!"

"Nope, that would be walking out to the meadow at five in the morning to bring in the horses," Alisa disagreed. "I'm talking December – it's still dark and the temperature's ten degrees below zero."

"Yet still she looks like she just stepped out of a Wrangler ad – not a hair out of place," Hayley joked.

"I do not," Alisa protested, but Kami believed Hayley. She'd already decided that her new roommate was just about the most elegant girl she'd ever met.

"And, Kami, I bet you thought stunt riding was all glamour and glitz," Hayley laughed. "They didn't tell you about the poop."

"It's OK, I live on a guest ranch." The three girls seemed super-friendly and Kami started to relax. "I'm used to it."

"We already know." Kellie had a round face and a big smile. "We also know you picked up first prize in the barrel racing at the Clearwater show. You've been competing forever, since you were five, which is eight years back. We heard your story from my brother Tom."

"Lizzie is a great scout," Alisa assured Kami. "She knows talent when she sees it. Jack's the one who has the contacts in the movies and TV. Once upon a time he was an actor and stunt rider himself, so he knows directors and other actors in the business, plus the agents who find most of our work and sort out the contracts. He deals with the money side of things."

"Lizzie and Jack work together on choreographing the stunts," Kellie explained. "They're both top names in the industry."

"Enough. I bet Kami already knows the history of Stardust!" Hayley cried, throwing her empty Coke can into the bin.

"No, I want to hear this." Kami took another swig from her cup and settled down to listen to her new friends. This was going to be a great experience, she decided – learning amazing stunts and chilling with the girls.

Kellie took over the story from Alisa. "Lizzie Jones is only the best horse trainer this side of the Rockies and she's into natural horsemanship methods, which means listening to what the horse is telling you and never using any force."

"Which makes us totally respect her," Alisa added. "She married Jack three years back, just before he joined Stardust Stables. Now they're in competition with Lizzie's ex – a guy named Pete Mason. He's set up a rival stunt-riding stables named High Noon."

"Yawn yawn," Hayley objected. "Come on, guys – there are horses to ride."

"No, Kami should know the basic insider facts." Alisa ignored Hayley, who shrugged her shoulders, then went to the corral to saddle up. "It's not been easy for them to keep the business going, especially since Pete often plays dirty by deliberately bad-mouthing Stardust and undercutting the fees we charge. In my book that amounts to stealing work that should rightly come to us."

"So what Alisa is trying to say is that we never know for sure when the next big deal is coming along," Kellie explained. "But, hey, until it does we just train and train until our butts are sore!"

"Talking of which," Alisa got up from the table, "I have to slap a saddle on Diabolo and take him down to the creek. This afternoon Jack wants to rehearse the 'fall from the horse and land in water' trick."

"After that he's teaching Dylan to ride through fire," Kellie added. "You think I'm kidding, Kami, but I'm not!"

★★★★★

"Never!" Kami promised Magic as she led him into the corral, tethered him to the rail and started to saddle him up for her first session in the round pen. "Never and no

way will I ever take you near flames!" Horses hated fire – it was their worst nightmare.

"She talks to her horse!"

Kami swung round, blushing furiously. Tom was right behind her, leading his horse, Legend, into the corral.

"She talks to her horse and expects him to answer," Tom teased. "Actually, it's kind of cute."

Kami felt hotter and more embarrassed than ever. "Anyway, I *won't* take Magic near fire!" she declared. "I'd never do anything that would put my horse in danger."

Tom only looked at her and grinned. Then he turned to his horse. "You hear that, Legend? No fire stunts for Kami and Magic."

Legend, the palomino, tossed her blonde mane.

"Legend says not to worry – there's always a rep from the American Humane Association on set, so 'No horse gets injured in the making of these films'."

There was something about Tom that made Kami smile. "I'm late. I have to meet Lizzie in the round pen." She untied Magic's lead rope and walked him out of the corral, feeling her stomach begin to knot up. What if it turned out she was no good at stunt riding?

How could she bear to go home and admit to her mom and dad that she wasn't going to perform any daredevil tricks in front of the camera after all?

"Hey, Kami." Lizzie Jones was already there, smiling down from her beautiful sorrel mare. "This is Sugar. And don't worry – we won't try anything too tricky this afternoon."

Kami swallowed hard. She felt Magic walking calmly at her side and this gave her confidence as she fastened her helmet, then swung herself into the saddle. "Good boy," she breathed, and she squeezed her legs against his sides.

First task – trotting round the arena, with Lizzie watching the movement of every muscle in horse and rider.

Second – squeezing again and sitting low in the saddle. Then, with a click of the tongue, easing Magic into a lope round the rim of the round pen.

By now Tom had finished grooming Legend in the corral and he and Zak had come to the fence to watch.

"Don't you have work to do?" Lizzie called when she spotted them.

"Nope," they insisted. "We're chilling."

"Well just try not to draw attention to yourselves, however hard that might be." Lizzie grinned, then gave Kami her next instruction. "Lope Magic until he's totally relaxed."

Kami loved the smoothness of Magic's stride. She loved his intelligence and everything about him. The sun shone down, sending the temperature soaring. Kami couldn't help smiling. This was as close to heaven as she ever hoped to get.

"OK, the first stunt you're going to learn this afternoon is how to stand up in the saddle," Lizzie explained, as she and Sugar came alongside. "Watch – I'll show you."

Kami concentrated hard as Lizzie kicked her feet free of the stirrups and hunched her knees towards her chest, then let go of the reins. As Sugar loped on, Lizzie leaned forward and tucked her feet right under her. Then she raised herself into a standing position and kept her balance by spreading her arms wide. "See?"

Kami nodded. Her mouth was dry, her palms sweaty.

"Try the first part," Lizzie told her. "Kick free of your stirrups and let go of the reins."

Kami did it. Magic didn't miss a beat. His ears were

swivelled back in her direction, waiting for her next move.

"Now pull your knees towards your chest."

She did as Lizzie instructed. She was perched on the shiny saddle and her balance wasn't quite right. Magic loped on. Kami leaned into the bend.

"Lean out," Lizzie called. But it was too late.

Leaning into the curve, Kami lost control. Then, as she felt herself slipping, she tried to grab the saddle horn.

"Whoa!" Tom and Zak called as she hit the ground.

Kami lay there as Lizzie caught hold of Magic's rein and brought him to a halt.

"You OK?" Lizzie checked.

Kami nodded. The only thing that hurt was her pride. She stood up and dusted herself down, then took a deep breath. "Sorry," she mumbled. Forget the glamour of stunt riding – she realized this was going to be pure grind and sweat, plus cuts and bruises, and maybe even a cracked rib or two along the way.

"No problem," Lizzie said. "Are you ready to try again?"

"This time without eating dirt," Kami promised Magic. She rubbed her sore back.

"You're not the first and you won't be the last to fall off your horse when you're training to be a stunt rider," Lizzie grinned. "Come on, let's go again."