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Sable Hamilton

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chapter four

"So cool!" Kami hung out of the window as Jack drove the Stardust trailer into a car park just outside Estes Park.

Jack nodded. "You know how it is – when a film company is out on location they take a whole mobile village along with them."

"Yeah, I remember from *Moonlight Dream*, but this is on another level. There are so many trucks! Are the ones with the big awnings for the caterers?" Kami pointed to a row of trailers beneath some tall pinyon pines and Douglas firs.

"Yeah," Jack told her. "And these Jeeps in the car park belong to the crew."

Kami took in every detail, reminding herself of how she'd felt when she and Magic had arrived on the set of *Moonlight Dream*. It was cool to see the trailers and

trucks all painted with their Diamond Studios logos, so as soon as Jack had parked up, she promised to get him a cup of coffee then scooted off to take a closer look around.

"Welcome," Rex Boyle said as he approached Alisa and Jack. "We're glad to have you here."

Alisa stood by as the two men shook hands. *They'll get along just fine,* she thought, noting that they shared the same tall, skinny physique and handsome, angular, weather-beaten features. And they seemed to respect one another from the get-go.

"I'd forgotten what a good-looking mount she is," Rex said as Jack unbolted the trailer door and Alisa stepped inside to fetch Diabolo. "You sure know how to pick out a nice-looking Quarter Horse."

"That's down to my wife," Jack explained. "Lizzie bought Diabolo long before I showed up."

"You hear that?" Alisa whispered in Diabolo's ear. "The head wrangler here likes you. But don't let it go to your head!"

Diabolo shook out her shiny chestnut mane, soaking up the admiration.

"This is not a shampoo ad!" Alisa scolded. "Cut it out

– we have work to do."

At that moment, Kami raced back with Jack's coffee and told Alisa all that she'd seen. "I just said hi to a bunch of actors standing outside the catering trailer. There was Scott Taylor, the kid who plays Joey in *Manhattan* – you know, the new soap. And the lady from the cop series set in Chicago..."

"Whoa, slow down," Alisa said as she led her high-stepping mare over to a nearby rail and tethered her safely.

"Sorry, I guess I'll have to get used to meeting famous people," Kami blushed, stepping aside as a dark-haired girl came over.

"Hey, you must be my stunt double," the girl said to Alisa.

It took a few seconds for Alisa to get her brain in gear. "Yeah, I'm Alisa Hamilton and this is my friend, Kami – she's part of the Stardust team. And you're Hannah?" she stammered. "Hannah Hart?"

"Yeah, sorry – I look different in the flesh," Hannah laughed. "Minus the lip gloss and the mascara, et cetera. You realize they airbrush the hell out of my publicity shots?"

"No, you don't... I mean, yeah. So cool." Alisa was gibbering like an idiot. *How many times have I done this*? she asked herself, blushing furiously. She wasn't a newbie like Kami – this was her third major contract for Stardust, not her first.

"So, anyway, introduce me to your horse," the A-list actress said. "What's your name, you drop-dead gorgeous creature?"

"She's called Diabolo," Alisa said, trying to shake off her shyness. "This is our third summer working together."

"Wow, she's amazing," Hannah sighed.

"She is pretty perfect," Alisa enthused. Just as she knew Rex and Jack would get along, she felt she had an immediate bond with Hannah. "I hear you're doing some of your own stunts. Would you like to take a ride on Diabolo?" she asked.

"Really? You mean it?" Hannah's brown eyes shone.

"Sure. Just let me and Kami strap a saddle on." Alisa helped Kami to lift the leather saddle from the rail and slide it on to Diabolo's back. Quickly she ducked under the horse's belly and buckled the cinch. Meanwhile, Kami slipped the bridle between Diabolo's teeth.

"She's real friendly," Alisa told Hannah. "And gentle

– honestly, she wouldn't hurt a fly."

In response to a friendly pat from Alisa, Diabolo arched her glossy neck and snorted. She waited patiently while Kami held the stirrup steady and the actress stepped into the saddle.

"Whoa, do we have insurance for this?" a guy from the technical crew called from the doorway of one of the trucks.

"Relax," Hannah told him. "I'm actually contracted to ride in this movie and I'm not planning to take any risks here." She squeezed her legs against Diabolo's sides, and the mare turned away from the rows of trailers and stepped out under the tall, straight trees. "Let's try a trot," Hannah suggested, giving her a quick, light kick. Diabolo broke into a smooth trot. "And a lope," Hannah said.

"Jeez, watch the low branch!" the panicky crew member yelled up the forested slope.

But there was no need to worry – Hannah was a confident rider and Diabolo carried the valuable star wide of the branch, weaving easily in and out of trees towards a trail used by hikers and riders as a route to the top of the mountain.

Alisa and Kami followed on foot. When they caught up with Hannah, they found her already down on the ground, her arms wound lovingly round Diabolo's neck.

"So cool!" Hannah sighed. "I wish I had your job!"

"You totally don't," Alisa laughed. "Just think of the pay cut!"

"I wouldn't complain." Carefree in the middle of the forest, hair fanned out across her shoulders, Hannah admitted that the glamorous movie-star life had its downside. "Have you any idea how long I spend in make-up every morning? And all those lines to learn, and the twenty-five takes to get a scene right. It drives me crazy." She handed Diabolo's reins to Alisa and stood back for one last admiring look. "OK, so I sound like a spoiled brat."

"No, I get it. But tell her, Kami – she still wouldn't want to be a stunt rider: up before dawn, scooping poop, hosing down saddle blankets in the midday sun, not to mention the work we put in on the actual stunts..."

"I guess it's not easy falling off a horse without breaking multiple bones?" Hannah laughed.

"It takes practice," Kami assured her.

"Or riding through gunfire and cannons, past explosions, across raging rivers..."

"Through flames and smoke," Alisa added.

"Gee, yeah." Hannah stuck up her hands in surrender. "But I still do love Diabolo."

"We do, too," Alisa and Kami agreed enthusiastically.

★★★★★

"So, no fire in this scene," Rex explained to Alisa as he walked her, Jack and Kami through the first stunt. The director and the rest of the crew had broken for lunch and Rex had taken them up a mountain trail to a clearing bordered on the far side by an old-style razor-wire fence designed to keep cows out of the park. In the centre of the clearing was a small wooden cabin.

Alisa had rolled up her sleeves and tied her hair in a high ponytail. She led Diabolo through the moves they would later make in front of the camera.

"This is the spot where Hannah's character gets shot. There's a killer hunkered down in the cabin as she rides by. He steps out with a rifle, shoots Hannah in the shoulder and the horse in the neck – right here." Rex scuffed the dirt with the heel of his boot. "You recoil

from the impact and at the same moment, Diabolo rears up. You hang on to the saddle horn while your horse lands, then takes off towards that fence." Pointing across the clearing, Rex waited for Alisa to pace out the distance between him and the razor-wire barrier.

"They're going to make her and Diabolo jump the fence?" Kami asked Jack with a shiver. To her eyes, the blades twisted into the wires looked sharp and vicious.

Jack nodded. "Wait till you see them take off. It'll be spectacular."

"So, your horse doesn't stop," Rex instructed Alisa. "She heads straight for the fence and our hearts are in our mouths, but at the last second she jumps clean over."

Alisa nodded. "Is there much blood when I get shot?" she asked.

"Plenty. You and Diabolo will both be fitted with prosthetics. A rep from the Humane Association already checked it out and watched the special-effects guys construct the plaster impression for the horse's wound. She'll be standing by on set to make sure we do everything properly. Do you want to try a dummy run?"

"No, we'll be fine," Alisa decided, her confidence building. After all, it was the kind of stunt she and

Diabolo spent their whole summers rehearsing back at Stardust Stables. "What time do we shoot the scene?"

"Three thirty this afternoon."

She nodded then walked back across the clearing to rejoin Kami and Jack. "I'm going to try to get this right first time."

"Sounds good to me." Jack never had any doubts about Alisa's ability, though Kami was still trying to picture exactly how her friend would pull off the seemingly dangerous stunt.

"You all want to come and grab some lunch?" Rex asked, then led the way back through the trees.

Alisa shook her head. "Thanks, but no, thanks. You go ahead. I'm going to hand Diabolo over to the special-effects department then get into costume and get fixed up ready to 'bleed'. Which shoulder do I get shot in?" she asked Rex.

"The right one."

"Cool." Walking her horse towards the costume trailer, she said goodbye to the others and carefully ran through the exact timing of the afternoon's stunt in her mind. "This is going to be fun," she told Diabolo. "I can't wait for Mr Peterson to call 'Action!'"

★★★★★

After lunch, Kami and Jack joined Alisa in the special-effects tent, as the technicians worked on Diabolo. Alisa explained to Kami the way the technical guys attached computer chips to the small bags of fake blood to make them burst at the press of a button and to look like authentic veins and arteries being shredded by bullets.

"Plus, of course, the guys fix a realistic prosthetic to Diabolo's neck – the side facing away from the first camera crew," Jack added. "Watch and learn."

He looked and sounded relaxed, leaning against the special-effects trailer, thumbs hooked into his jeans pockets. "And you're all kitted out?" he checked with Alisa.

She nodded and pulled back her shirt to reveal the sachet of fake blood underneath.

"It's so neat," Kami said. "Cool!"

"Good girl," Alisa murmured in Diabolo's ear as the team worked on.

"This is one patient animal," the woman who was fitting the prosthetic commented. "She's hardly moved a muscle all the time I've been working."

Diabolo flicked her ears, as if she understood the praise.

"There – we're done," the technician said.

"You're Alisa Hamilton, Hannah's stunt double – right?" A runner came up, clipboard in hand. "We need you on set in five minutes."

Alisa nodded and, with one last check of her own sachet of fake blood, she said goodbye to Jack and Kami then led Diabolo up the trail towards the clearing where the action would take place.

"Relax," Jack advised a nervous Kami, who nodded. "No need to feel like the third wheel here."

"I'm cool," Kami insisted as she set off with Jack up the hill. "Actually, I'm loving it."

Meanwhile, higher up the mountain, Rex checked a couple of things with Alisa.

"You're sure you don't want to rehearse this?"

"No, thanks." She was looking ahead towards a bunch of people gathered around a cameraman. Among them she suddenly spotted the familiar face of Pete Mason! She gave a small groan as she recognized Lizzie's ex. "What's he doing here?" she mouthed over her shoulder at Jack.

Jack followed the direction of her gaze, stiffening when he saw Mason. He shrugged, then took out his cell phone and selected a number.

Meanwhile, Diabolo tossed her mane from her eyes and snorted. She was impatient to get to work.

Alisa looked again at the group of bystanders and recognized a second person – Lucy Reeves, standing next to Mason. "I haven't seen her since I competed against her in Virginia," she muttered to herself.

Again Diabolo tugged at the reins. *Come on, let's go!*

Jack's going to be furious, Alisa thought. *And considering the way Pete's acted since the divorce from Lizzie, I'm not surprised.*

She, along with Kami, Hayley, Kellie and the rest of the team back at Stardust, were one hundred per cent convinced that Pete Mason had recently driven on to the Stardust Stables yard early one morning and sneakily opened the meadow gate to set the horses loose. It had been a mean trick, deliberately sabotaging newbie Kami, as she was about to set out for California on her first big contract.

And I'm not liking him any better now, Alisa thought darkly. He was heavyset and his scowling face was

fleshy and shadowed by a two-day stubble. He was wearing a denim shirt and a big fancy belt buckle, plus expensive-looking cowboy boots.

"Ready?" Rex's prompt jerked Alisa's attention back to the job in hand and she had no more time to think about Mason and Lucy. A Jeep came up the trail and stopped to let Mike Peterson out.

Straight away the lighting and sound crews cut the chat and took up position, followed by the actor playing the killer. As he stepped inside the old log cabin to wait for his cue, she heard Kami wish her luck as the director barked out instructions to the cameramen.

Meanwhile Jack approached Alisa for a final chat. "You're cool with everything?" he checked.

"Yeah. But what's Pete Mason doing here? And Lucy Reeves?"

"I have no clue. I just tried to call Lizzie, but I can't get a signal. So, anyway, we'll deal with it later. Let's just get on with the stunt."

Another runner sprinted up to Jack. "Mr Peterson is ready to shoot now. Please step aside."

Taking a deep breath and vaulting into the saddle, Alisa cleared her head and focused on the stunt they

had to perform. A guy with a clapperboard announced the scene number. The director called "Action!" and she rode into the clearing in character, just like any normal, everyday girl without a care in the world.

"Easy," Alisa murmured to Diabolo, her whole body relaxing into the horse's steady walk. "Good girl, nice and easy."

Suddenly, as she and Diabolo reached the prearranged spot, the actor playing the killer flung open the cabin door, raised his repeat-action stunt rifle and shot twice. Bam! Bam! Two loud cracks tore into the peaceful silence.

Instantly Alisa threw her weight way back in the saddle, dropped the reins and twisted her torso, her left hand clutching her right shoulder. The hidden sachet burst and crimson stained her white shirt. At the same moment the simulated gash on Diabolo's neck spurted with blood and she reared on to her hind legs.

Alisa grabbed the saddle horn with her left hand and allowed herself to be flung this way and that as Diabolo landed, put in a small buck for good measure then took off towards the razor-wire fence.

Diabolo, you're such a diva! Alisa hid a smile as she

lunged forward over the horn and her hair swung loose across her face. She maintained her balance, riding without reins so that it had to be Diabolo who judged her own pace and decided exactly when to take off. With her chestnut mane flying and wild eyes rolling, she left it to the last moment to jump the cruel barrier. Up and over.

"Cut!" Mr Peterson called.

"Whoa!" Alisa murmured and Diabolo responded. She reached for the trailing reins and together they turned, re-took the fence at a steady lope and arrived back in the clearing. "How was that?" she asked Rex, seeing that the director had already turned away to talk with one of his assistants.

Making a circle with his thumb and middle finger, Rex gave the sign that the stunt had gone perfectly.

"No more takes?"

"You got it right first time," Rex told her. "See – even Mr Peterson's happy."