

**coverstory**  
BY JAY BOBBIN

Melissa Joan Hart stars in "Mistletoe in Montana" Friday on Lifetime.



# Melissa Joan Hart offers 'Mistletoe in Montana'

Melissa Joan Hart knows what it's like to direct other actors, so she doesn't mind being directed by one ... especially if the person is a close friend.

Television's former "Sabrina, the Teenage Witch" is guided by "Life Goes On" and "ER" alum Kellie Martin in "Mistletoe in Montana," a Lifetime movie that debuts Friday, Dec. 17. Also an executive producer of the film along with her mother Paula, Hart plays the operator of a ranch resort that a single father (Duane Henry, "NCIS") visits with his children at holiday time, possibly resulting in romance. Jamey Sheridan ("Law & Order: Criminal Intent") also stars as the Hart character's father.

"This movie is actually inspired by my cousin's true-life experience going to a dude ranch," Hart explains. "She met a wrangler and fell in love, so this is the flip-flop of that. We were at her wedding in Wyoming last year, and my mother and I were on horseback ... and I said, 'This would make a great movie.' And she said, 'Well, do you want to be the wrangler or the guest?' And I was like, 'I wanna be the wrangler, 'cause I wanna really learn how to be a cowgirl.'"

Hart drew upon a summer of childhood horse-riding lessons, but she says that while making the movie on

location, "I rode as many horses as I could for as long as I could, and learned about different rein techniques and different ways to respond to a horse and how horses respond to you. There were some lessons I went away for and told my husband, 'I'll see you in three hours, if you're lucky. I might not make it back.'"

Though director Martin starred in 2019's "Christmas in Montana," that actually was filmed in Canada, but she's familiar with Montana as her husband's home state. After directing a couple of her "Mystery Woman" capers, she notes her latest turn in that seat was "super-challenging. There's not a lot of film crew based in Montana, and this particular summer because of the pandemic, a lot of people were like, 'I want to get away where there are no people. Let's go to Montana.' It was surprisingly difficult to shoot there this summer.

"That being said," adds Martin, "I know Montana so well that I do feel I brought some knowledge about what it is about. I added shots of snowy owls and elk and all the things that make Montana Montana. It was nice to be able to shoot there, even though we had to acknowledge in the script that it was unseasonably warm. Which, by the way, does happen. Often, they don't get snow there until after Christmas."

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