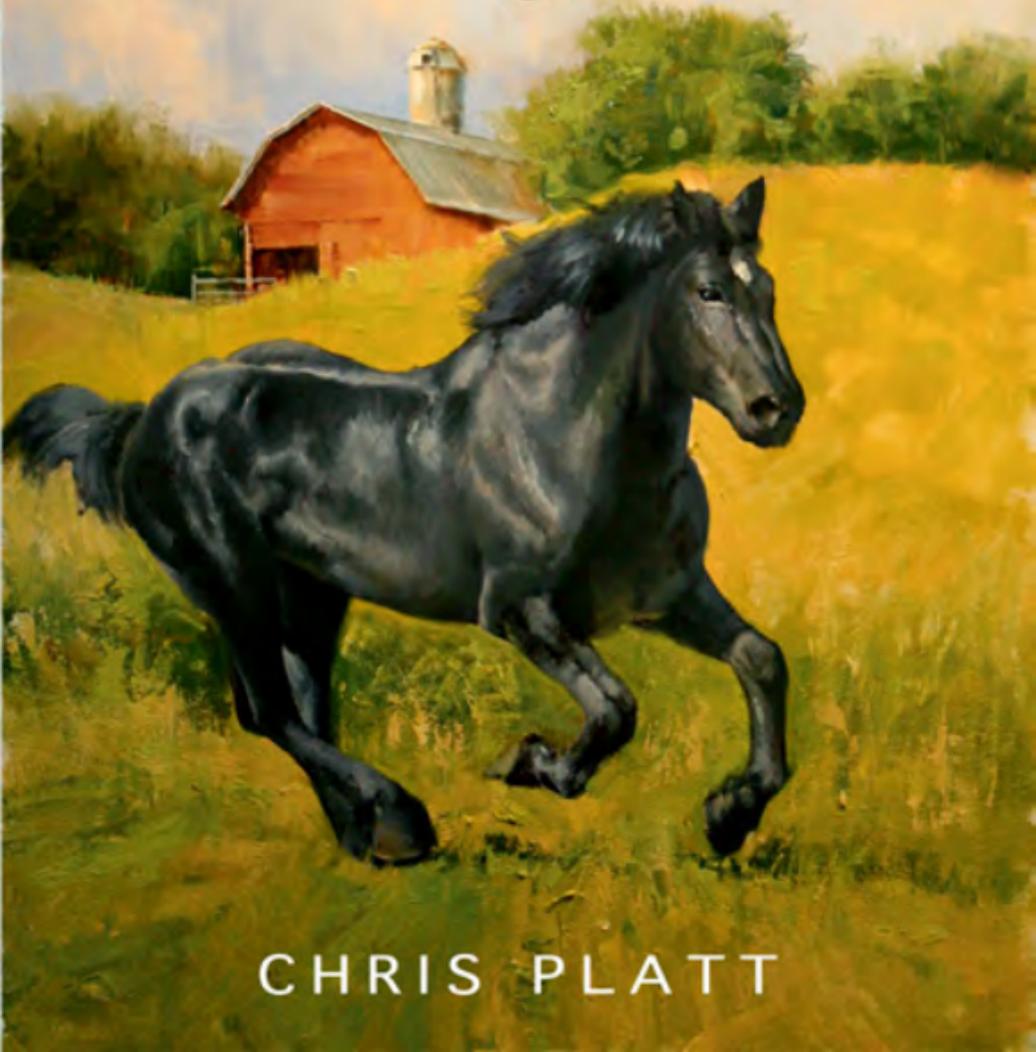


star gazer



CHRIS PLATT

CHRIS PLATT

star gazer




PEACHTREE
ATLANTA



Published by
PEACHTREE PUBLISHERS
1700 Chattahoochee Avenue
Atlanta, Georgia 30318-2112
www.peachtree-online.com

Text © 2011 by Chris Platt
Cover illustration © 2011 by Paul Bachem

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Cover design by Maureen Withee
Book design by Melanie McMahon Ives

Printed in June 2011 by Lake Book Manufacturing in Melrose Park, Illinois, in the
United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Platt, Chris, 1959-
Star Gazer / written by Chris Platt.
p. cm.

Summary: Thirteen-year-old Jordan's new horse Star Gazer has been neglected and has a lot to overcome, but nevertheless Jordan vows to beat Star Gazer's former owner in the state championships at the end of the summer.

ISBN 978-1-56145-596-6 / 1-56145-596-2

[1. Horses—Fiction. 2. Horses—Training—Fiction. 3. Determination (Personality trait)—Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.P7123115St 2011

[Fic]—dc22

2010052068

*For all of those who have had the pleasure of
working with Heavy Horses.*

And, especially to Sheri, Nick, Dani, and Sue,

*with special thanks to Sheri Spanial and
Sue Vilardi for the technical help
and the hours of fun while driving drafts.*



one

Look out!” Jordan McKenzie reached for the dashboard to brace herself. Her mother jerked the steering wheel hard right, making room for the speeding vehicle that had ignored the No Passing sign.

A boy about Jordan’s age leaned out the window of the beat-up red truck, laughing and pointing.

“He almost hit us!” Jordan exclaimed. She thought she recognized the kid, but she couldn’t be sure. She and her mom had only moved to this town two weeks ago. The vehicle had passed too quickly to see the driver.

“You’re *never* getting your driver’s license,” Jordan’s mother said. Her hands were shaking as she guided the car back onto the narrow two-lane road.

“Mom...” Jordan rolled her eyes and blew a stray lock of her dark wavy hair off her forehead. “I’m only thirteen. I’ve got two more years before I can even get my permit.”

Her mother adjusted her rearview mirror and took a steadying breath. “They passed us on a blind curve,” she pointed out. “What if someone had been coming from the opposite direction? Or what if a farmer had pulled out with a big piece of heavy equipment? Those boys wouldn’t have

CHRIS PLATT

stood a chance. And they could have killed someone else, too!”

Jordan shook her head at the stupidity of it all, then turned her attention to the scenery. For the last half-hour, they’d been passing through mile after mile of cornfields. Someone had told her that “knee-high by the Fourth of July” was the mantra of every corn farmer in the area.

After growing up in Los Angeles, moving to a farming community in Southern Michigan was quite a change. It was going to take some serious getting used to. But she had never fit in with big-city life anyway. While her classmates in L.A. were wearing makeup and heels, Jordan had been more comfortable in jeans and tennis shoes. Everyone she knew there had all the latest electronic gadgets. Jordan didn’t even own a cell phone.

The small township of North Adams, Michigan, where they now lived, was nothing like where she grew up. She’d been used to giant malls and restaurants on every corner. Here, you had to drive thirty miles to get to the nearest McDonald’s or Walmart.

Weird.

Jordan smiled to herself as they moved beyond the cornfields and came to an expanse of soybeans and wheat. *No more cement*, she thought. *No more skyscrapers*. But there were plenty of wide-open spaces and—best of all—horses!

Jordan had wanted a horse of her own ever since she could remember, but even if they could have afforded to buy a horse, it had cost too much to board one in Los Angeles. She’d had to content herself with riding lessons at one of the stables on the outskirts of the city.

The first thing on her list after unpacking the rest of her belongings was convincing her mom to let her get a horse.

star gazer

For the past couple of years, Jordan had saved her allowance and the money she made from odd jobs. She had almost a thousand dollars in her savings account. She didn't know how much a horse cost in this part of the country, but she was willing to work until she had enough money to buy one.

They passed a two-story brick farmhouse with a hand-lettered sign out front that said, "Fresh eggs and baked goods for sale." Jordan marveled at the antique farm equipment and old-fashioned buggies that stood beside the large barn.

North Adams and the surrounding towns were home to a few Amish and Mennonite families. Jordan wasn't exactly sure what being Amish or Mennonite meant, other than belonging to a certain religion. But she'd learned to recognize these people from their dress and customs. She'd seen an occasional horse and buggy around town, and noticed several groups of women selling baked goods from small booths on the side of the road. With their plain blue dresses, caps that covered their hair, and white aprons, they looked different than the other women in North Adams.

Jordan knew what it was like to be different. She hoped to fit in better here than she had in L.A.

They drove past another large farm. Her mother was driving slowly now, so Jordan craned her neck to get a better look. The name Miller appeared on the mailbox.

She pressed her nose against the window, staring at the two beautiful Belgian draft horses a teenage boy led from the barn. Their golden coats and white manes and tails gleamed in the sun.

Something about those horses had drawn Jordan in the first time she'd seen them on parade in her hometown. The owner of the fancy hitch wagon and team had given her a ride, and Jordan had instantly fallen in love with the unique

CHRIS PLATT

animals. She was fascinated by their huge size and muscle power. They were twice as big as the horses she'd ridden during the lessons in California. She could see herself owning a draft someday. But they were probably pretty expensive. Jordan flopped back into the seat and sighed. Someday...

They came to the last big curve in the road before their house. Jordan's mom slowed the car even more to make the sharp bend.

"Oh, no!" Mrs. McKenzie slammed on the brakes and pulled off the two-lane road.

Jordan stared at the scene before them, not quite sure what she was looking at. Long black skid marks marred the blacktop ahead. It took her a second to realize there was an overturned vehicle on the side of the road—a red one like the one that had passed them a mile back. The black heap in the middle of the two-lane road was what was left of an Amish buggy.

In the next instant, Jordan noticed a horse lying in the road, partially buried beneath the buggy and tangled in the harness and wreckage. She couldn't be sure if the poor animal was dead or alive.

Her mother threw open the car door and stepped out. "Stay here, Jordan. Use my cell phone and call 911. Tell them there are injuries."

Jordan watched her mother sprint away from the car. She didn't know her mom could move that fast. She took a deep breath and steadied her hands, then dialed 911. She kept her eye on the horse as she pressed the emergency numbers and waited for the operator to answer. She rehearsed what she would say; she knew the name of the highway, and she knew they couldn't be more than a mile from their house. When a woman's voice came on the line, she quickly gave her the information.

star gazer

By the time Jordan hung up, several other cars had pulled over, and two men were cutting the horse free of his harness. The animal lifted its head and began to struggle, thrashing about on the pavement as it tried to stand.

Jordan sucked in her breath. She was glad the horse was alive, but she hoped it wouldn't cause even more damage to itself than the crash had. Unable to stand it any longer, she shouldered the door open and stepped out of the car.

Her mother came running back toward their vehicle, and for a second Jordan thought she was in trouble for getting out of the car.

"Jordan, grab the first aid kit and follow me."

She retrieved the white plastic kit from the backseat and ran to join her mother. Her heart jumped wildly in her chest. She'd never been this close to an accident.

Jordan took in everything as fast as she could. The troublemaking boys had climbed from their overturned vehicle. They were able to walk, but blood covered their faces and lacerated arms. The older boy limped to a rock and sat down so people could tend his wounds.

The horse was now standing. Jordan couldn't tell how badly it was injured.

Jordan's mother took her hand and dragged her to a spot where an older man and a teenage boy sat on the side of the road.

These had to be the people from the buggy. The elderly gentleman with the long gray beard looked like he'd just stepped out of another century and into the present. A broad-brimmed black felt hat sat at a precarious angle on his head. His dark trousers were torn in several places, and his white shirt and dark vest were stained with blood.

The boy looked dazed. He was dressed like the Mennonite boys she'd seen in town. A big bump showed through the

CHRIS PLATT

sandy-brown hair on his forehead, and his torn clothing exposed numerous cuts and scrapes. Blood stained his plain blue shirt, and his pants were covered with dirt.

As Jordan looked closer at the old man, she could tell by the pain on his face and the way he held his arm that it might be broken. He stared into the distance and kept up a steady stream of barely audible words that sounded like a foreign language. He tipped his head toward the boy, indicating that Jordan and her mom should take care of him first.

Her mother opened the first aid kit and quickly introduced herself as she began to attend the boy.

He winced when she applied antiseptic to a cut on his arm. "My name is Jacob," he said, "and this is my friend, Brother Samuel Fisher."

She nodded to the older man, then turned back to the boy. "Hold on, Jacob. I'm almost done here," she said. "I'm Mary McKenzie and this is my daughter, Jordan."

"Thank you, Mrs. McKenzie...Jordan." As the boy repeated her name, he gave Jordan a small, pained smile.

Jordan smiled back. Her name sounded different when he said it.

"Do you go to school here, Jacob?" Mrs. McKenzie asked. "We're new in town, and my daughter will be attending junior high here in North Adams this fall."

"Yes, ma'am, I'll be in the same school."

Mrs. McKenzie passed the bottle of antiseptic to Jordan. "You finish up with Jacob, while I see to Mr. Fisher."

Jordan took over, trying to dab on the medicine without causing Jacob too much pain. "Why does Mr. Fisher keep talking under his breath?" she asked. "What language is that?"

"It's called Pennsylvania Dutch," he explained. "It's a German dialect spoken by Old Order Amish. He's asking the

star gazer

good Lord to help the boys who caused this—and praying for patience for himself so he doesn't wander over there and whup their hides.”

Jordan paused with the cotton swab in midair, her eyebrows lifted in confusion. “But I thought...?”

“What?” Jacob laughed. “That the Amish don't ever get mad?”

Jordan nodded, feeling heat creep into her cheeks. It *was* a stupid generalization.

“Amish—and Mennonites like myself—are dedicated to a lifestyle of peace and nonviolence,” Jacob said, the corner of his mouth turned up in a crooked grin. “But we're human, too. The same things that make you mad are probably the same things that upset us. We just try really hard to control our anger. There's usually a way around violence.”

Mrs. McKenzie had finished stabilizing Mr. Fisher's arm. “I wish more people lived by that rule,” she said, looking over toward the boys from the red truck.

Sirens sounded in the distance. “Looks like help will be here in a minute,” she said. “Once you're at the hospital, they'll take better care of your arm, Mr. Fisher.”

Jordan looked surprised. “The Amish can ride in cars?”

Jacob sighed and stood up. He was at least a head taller than she was, and his eyes were a startling blue.

“Yes,” he said. “The Amish can ride in cars. They just don't believe in *owning* them. And they don't turn to stone if they walk into a hospital. That's permissible.” He tipped his hat, then knelt to speak to his elderly friend.

The older man assured Jacob that he was all right, then looked up at Jordan and her mom. “I'm grateful for your help,” he said in his heavily accented English. He turned toward the scene of the wreck. “*Ach*, I need to see about my

CHRIS PLATT

horse. He's a good animal, *ja*. He didn't need this trouble."

"I'll go check," Jordan volunteered. She needed to get away from this boy and his smiling eyes and teasing ways. And she truly wanted to see how the horse had fared. The men who had freed the animal were more than happy to hand the broken reins over to her. Jordan could tell they knew nothing about horses—not that she was an expert by any means, but she knew a bit more than they did.

"That's a good boy," Jordan said, rubbing the horse's neck to comfort him. While she stood there, trying to decide what to do, the police and ambulance pulled up to the scene, their sirens blaring and lights flashing. The noise caused the old horse to jump around at the end of the reins, despite his injuries.

"Easy, easy," Jordan crooned, placing a calming hand on the horse as she tried to avoid getting her toes stepped on by dancing hooves. Jordan breathed a sigh of relief when the EMTs finally turned off the obnoxious noise and the horse settled down. She decided to move him further down the road away from all the noise and confusion.

Mr. Fisher never got a chance to see how his horse was doing. The medics whisked him and Jacob into the ambulance and sped away. The second ambulance to arrive took care of the boys from the truck.

When the dust cleared, Jordan was left standing at the side of the road, still holding the reins. Her mother joined her and patted the old horse's head. "Looks like we're going to have a visitor for a few days," she said.

"Really?" Jordan couldn't believe her ears.

Her mother nodded. "After I gave the policeman my statement, I tried to ask him about the horse, but he had to move on to the other people," she said. "We can't leave him here

star gazer

by the side of the road. We're not too far from our house. If he can walk, get him heading our direction and keep him off to the side of the road so you're safe. I'll drive behind you with my safety lights flashing."

Jordan turned the horse and started walking toward their new home. It didn't matter that he belonged to someone else and would only be with them for a day or two. They were going to have a real live horse in their barn!