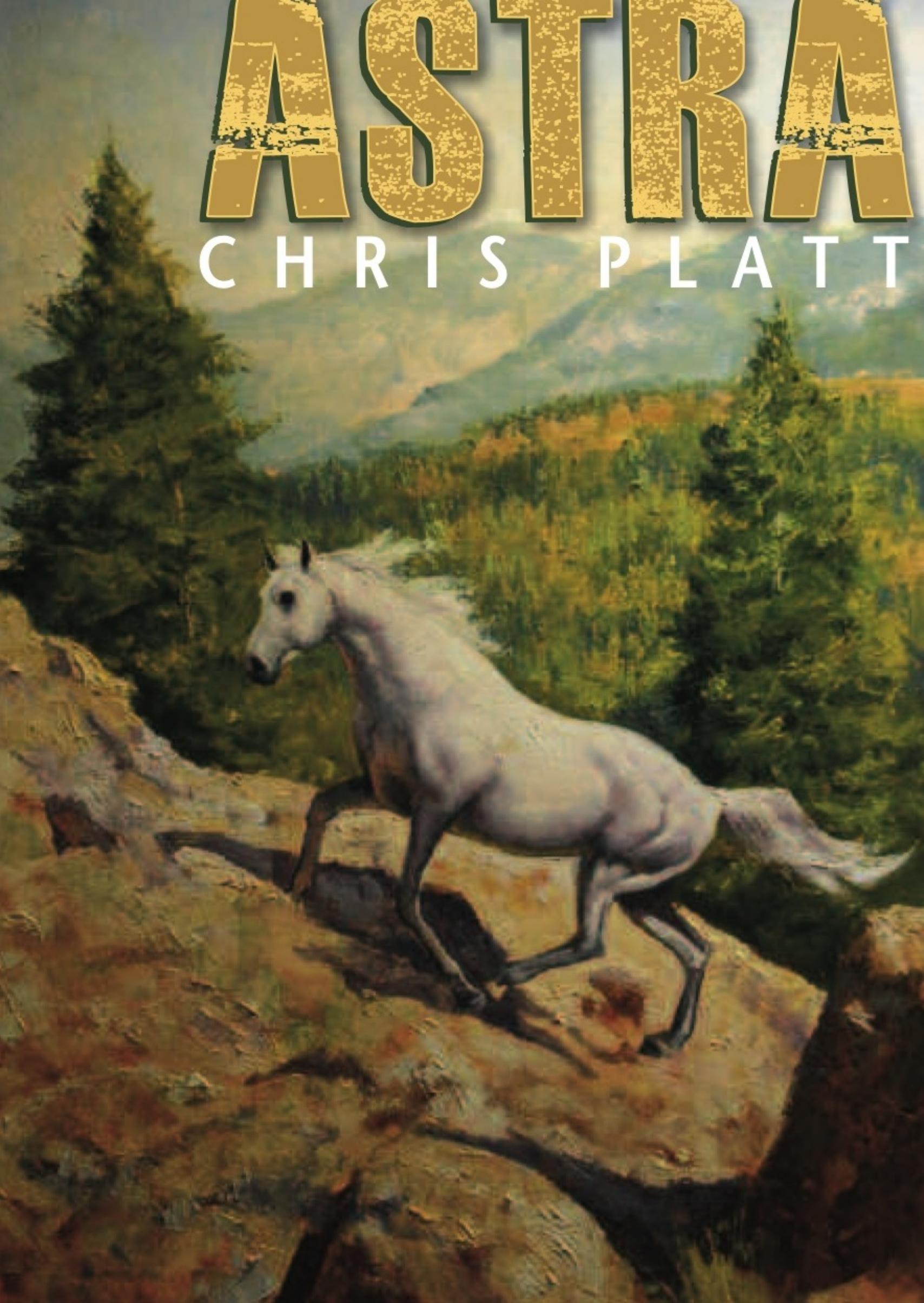


ASTRA

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Late again! Thirteen-year-old Lily O'Neil rolled out of bed and reached for her jeans, shivering as the cold air touched her skin. Her breath frosted the air as she pulled a sweatshirt over her head and slipped on her boots. The pot-bellied stove must have gone out during the night. It was late February in her small Northern California town, and winter promised more cold weather to come.

She rubbed the frost off the inside of her window and peered through the early morning light to the house and stable next door. Whispering Pines Ranch, with its large white house and huge twenty-stall barn, nestled against the base of the beautiful Sierra Nevada foothills, and was a sight to behold.

Lily looked at the chipped paint on her windowsill and sighed. She loved the quaint little farmhouse she shared with her father and grandma, but the barn at Whispering Pines was bigger than their house and small stable put together.

The owner of Whispering Pines, Steven Henley, raised Arabian endurance horses and competed successfully on a national level. Lily hoped to someday follow in her mother's footsteps and ride for Mr. Haley. One of his good mares,

Astra Atomica, was a favorite of Lily's and had the potential to become a champion like her half-sister, Contina. Lily desperately wanted to see Astra become a great endurance horse.

The problem was, after the accident, Lily's over-protective father had forbidden her to ever ride again. He didn't even want her around horses. She'd never get a chance to step into Astra's saddle.

She thought about Domino, the beautiful black and white pony she'd been forced to sell. Luckily her grandmother was on her side and had convinced her father to let her help groom and feed the horses in Mr. Haley's stable. If her father had his way, Lily would never set eyes on another horse again. She knew her mother would have hated that idea.

Lily didn't think much of it either. She ran out her bedroom door and bounded down the stairs two at a time. Horses were her life—just like they'd been for her mom.

She crossed the living room on the way to their small, cozy kitchen, and spied her grandmother stoking the pot-bellied stove. "Here, Grams, let me do that," she said taking the pieces of wood from her grandmother's weathered hands and feeding them into the fire.

"Thank you, dear," Grandma O'Neil said, dusting the tree bark off her hands. "Your father was so tired when he went to bed last night, I think he forgot to stock the stove." She pulled her sweater close about her shoulders and held her hands out to the heat.

Tossing the last log on the fire, Lily closed the stove door. Her father had been working a lot of overtime lately. It didn't surprise her that he fell into bed dead-dog tired at the end of the day. She suspected they were behind on their bills and

he was putting in extra hours to make up for it. Things had been pretty tough lately.

“I made you a nice cup of hot tea and some toast,” her grandmother said. “I know you won’t take the time to sit down to a full meal. There are horses to be fed and cared for next door,” she said with a wink.

Lily grabbed her hat and coat off the hook by the back door, then picked up the toast, stuffing half a piece into her mouth at once. She chased it down with tea so hot it almost burned her mouth, then repeated the routine with the rest of the toast and drink.

“Thanks, Grams.” The words came out punctuated by crumbs of toast escaping her lips. She wiped them off and tried not to giggle as she gave her grandmother a peck on the cheek. “I’ll be home in a few hours. Hopefully, Dad will sleep in a bit today. He’s working too hard.” She zipped up her jacket and headed out the door.

Her bicycle stood propped against the side of the house. She got on and peddled down the dirt road that ran in front of the two houses, turning down the long dirt driveway that lead to Whispering Pines.

Along the way, she passed white-fenced paddocks filled with beautiful Arabian horses and marveled at their long, elegant necks and perfectly shaped heads. Several of the horses looked up at the sound of her bike and cocked their tails over their backs, racing down the fence line toward the barn.

Grace and elegance on four legs, her mother used to say about the spirited beauties. A deep sadness crept over her at the thought of her mom, and she pushed it back. One day at a time, Lily reminded herself.

The front tire of her bike dropped into a pothole, splat-

tering muddy water on her pant legs. Lily's teeth clacked together and she almost lost control of the bike. If she didn't take her eyes off the horses and pay attention to the road, she wouldn't have any teeth left in her head by the time she got to the barn.

She peddled into the barnyard and parked her bike under the tall Ponderosa pine. Memories washed over her of when she used to ride Domino over to join her mother for the long walk down the dirt road on one of the racers. Mr. Henley required the walk to loosen up the horses for their coming workout.

Lily had loved making that ride with her mother. She enjoyed the fun conversations while she rocked to the rhythmic swing of Dominic's stride. Back then, she'd imagined the day she'd get to ride one of the awesome Arabian racers.

Sometimes her mom let her trot the first mile or two of the workout. But Domino would soon tire and want to go back to the barn while the racer picked up the pace and headed up the mountain trail with ears pricked and tail floating on the wind. Lily had watched them go, vowing that some day, she'd follow in her mom's boot steps and be a great endurance rider that could compete with the best of them.

"Yeah, right!" She scoffed at herself. Domino had managed to dump her on her backside on a regular basis, and he was fairly well broke. The high-spirited Arabians with their cat-like reflexes would guarantee her almost as much time on the ground as she'd spend in the saddle. But she was determined to become a better rider—although she wasn't sure how she could do that when her father wouldn't allow her to ride.

"Good morning, Lily." Mr. Henley straightened his tall, thin frame and eyed his watch. "You're a bit late this morning."

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“I’m sorry, Mr. Henley.” Lily shoved her hands deep into her pockets and looked at the ground. “I overslept.” She hoped her tardiness wouldn’t be cause for him to let her go. Her father allowed her to help Mr. Henley with the horses partly because he was their neighbor. But if Mr. Henley wouldn’t let her help anymore, her father would probably say no to anybody else’s horses.

Jill, Mr. Henley’s sixteen-year-old daughter, handed Lily three grain buckets and pointed her toward the first several stalls. “Dad!” she chastised her father. “Lily isn’t on our payroll. She comes over here out of the goodness of her heart to help us. It’s not like you can dock her pay.” She rolled her eyes and went back to mixing grain.

Lily smiled her thanks at the older girl. Jill had always been nice to her. If they’d been closer in age, they might have become good friends.

Nickers of excitement echoed up and down the shed row as horses bobbed their heads and pawed the shavings under their hooves in anticipation of breakfast.

Lily quickly fed the three horses nearest the tack room, then slipped into Astra’s stall and greeted the beautiful gray Arabian with the black mane and tail with a good scratch under the mane.

Astra Atomica was the perfect example of an Arabian horse. She had a broad forehead with wide-set, intelligent eyes; small curved ears and a perfectly dished face that led to a petite muzzle with large nostrils. She stood fifteen hands tall—a hand being four inches—and she had well-balanced shoulders and hind quarters.

Lily knew that the successful breeding programs from thousands of years ago meant that today’s Arabian was virtually the same horse as the ones ridden in Ancient Arabia.

They were the oldest known breed of riding horse, and one of today's most popular. Someday she was going to own one!

Astra poked her whiskered muzzle into Lily's pockets, searching for the treat she knew the girl would bring her.

"Here you go, pretty." Lily fed her the oats and molasses horse treats she'd bought with her weekly allowance. While Astra munched happily, Lily poured the mare's grain into her feed tub and stepped back to watch the daily ritual. The gray stepped forward and stuck her nose deep into the feeder, then swished her head from side to side, pushing the grain around like she stirred a bowl. She pawed several times with her right front leg and blew through her lips, then settled in to eat.

"You're so goofy!" Lily said, running her hand lovingly down the mare's long, perfectly arched neck. She laid her cheek against Astra's mane and breathed deeply of the warm horse scent, sighing dreamily. She knew why her mother had loved this horse. Lily loved her, too. And like her mother, she also believed that Astra Atomica could place in the top ten of the Tevis Cup some day. It had been her mother's dream and goal.

And now it was Lily's.

But she didn't own Astra. She had no control over what happened with her. Mr. Henley wasn't so positive about the mare's abilities. He had several other big-talent horses in his stable and put most of his efforts into them. He saw Astra as just another horse in his stable. She was a safe mare to ride, so he'd given her to his son Charlie to exercise and prepare for the fifty-mile endurance races.

Lily cringed when she thought about Charlie. He was in the same class as her at school and she had the unfortunate honor of sitting next to him in math class. Math was bad

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enough without adding Charlie to the mix. Too bad he couldn't be more like his older sister, Jill.

Charlie didn't have his sister's sensibilities. He was just plain mean. And although he was a good rider—much better than she was—Charlie didn't care much about anyone or anything but himself.

Even worse, he loved teasing Lily.

She pushed Charlie from her thoughts and turned her attention back to Astra. Giving the mare one last pat, she went to help Jill finish the rest of the feeding.

There was a set routine around the barn. Mr. Henley liked doing things a certain way. And since he owned the place, he got what he wanted.

All the horses were grained first thing in the morning. Racers got the largest portions because they expended the biggest amount of energy. Broodmares, yearlings and two year olds got the next biggest ration because they were growing or reproducing. Mr. Henley kept the grain supply down on the saddle horses and those being broke to saddle because he didn't want them hyped up and bucking people off.

Once the grain was fed, all horses were to be left alone to eat their morning oats and given a few extra minutes to digest. Once that was done, the grooms would pull those racers scheduled for a workout from their stalls. They'd be brushed and have their hooves picked, then saddled for the exercise rider.

The racers usually stayed out for at least two-to-three hours; sometimes as long as five or six. While the riders had the horses out on the trail, Lily helped clean their stalls, scrub water buckets and hang hay nets. Sometimes she even got to move horses from their stalls to the turn-out pens.

Lily checked her watch. She had ten minutes until it was

time to groom the racers for their morning workouts. She returned the empty grain buckets to the feed room, then made her way down the aisle to Mr. Henley's trophy wall. She didn't look at it when she entered, but instead, stood with eyes closed, listening to the sound of the horses rustling around in their stalls, and breathed in the wonderful mix of horses and fresh hay.

When the moment was right, she opened her eyes, always amazed at the massive amount of ribbons and trophies on the shelves. Everywhere she looked among the awards there were photos of horses and riders snapped during the race or crossing the finish line first.

Racers weren't allowed to compete until they were five years of age. By then, their bones were developed enough to withstand the grueling races.

Certificates of Mileage were given by the American Endurance Riding Conference, and had their own special place of honor on the wall. Each time one was earned, it was proudly displayed here. Both horses and riders were awarded this special honor. Riders got their awards at the first two-hundred-fifty miles, then at five-hundred, seven-hundred-fifty and one-thousand miles. After that it was only every thousand miles. A medallion was given to the horse every thousand miles.

Mr. Henley had two horses over five-thousand miles, and his current star, Contina, approached her three-thousand-mile mark. Astra was eight years old and had yet to earn her one-thousand mile award. Before her mother started riding the mare, they'd had trouble with the horse having sore feet. But her mom had successfully ridden the horse in ten races. The last few, she'd placed in the top five.

Lily let her eyes wander to the photos of her mother and

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Astra. She stepped closer to the wall and held her breath while she reached out a shaky hand to touch the last photo taken—the one at the beginning of the Tevis Cup last year, before the accident.

She allowed herself a brief moment to let the pain come crashing in—but only a moment. It filled her with a hollow ache so deep she thought her knees might give way. She tried to breathe but her lungs refused to obey.

The edges of her vision began to gray and tears welled in her eyes, escaping down her cheeks. She quickly pulled her hand away feeling as if she'd been singed by the memory.

Closing her eyes once more, she sucked in a large breath and willed the tears to stop. Her mother wouldn't want her to cry and carry on. When she had her emotions under control, she opened her eyes and smiled at the photo of her beautiful, loving mom. She tamped down the memory of the tragic loss and reminded herself to remember all the wonderful times they had—just as her mom had asked her to do.

Lost in her thoughts, Lily didn't hear the footsteps approaching behind her. The nasally voice, sounding more like one of her grandmother's old scratchy records rather than a teenage boy, immediately set her nerves on edge. Charlie had found her. The annoyance was about to begin.

"Why do you always stand here and stare at this wall? You've seen it a gazillion times." He reached out and tweaked her hair. "That's really kind of weird, you know?"

Lily twisted around to glare at him, wishing the force of her stare would knock him into the manure pile outside the barn door. He reached out to pull her hair again and she swatted his hand.

Charlie crossed his arms and glared right back, trying to stare her down. "Your mom died because of that horse. I

know people say it wasn't anyone's fault, but if I were you, I wouldn't want anything to do with Astra."

"Let's go, loser." Jill's voice filled the room like a blast of January wind. Lily tried not to laugh as the older girl grabbed her brother by the ear. Jill dragged him away from the trophy wall, and out of Lily's presence.

"Get your skinny butt down to the yearling pens and get those corrals cleaned before I decide to tell Dad what you've been up to this morning," Jill threatened. "And when you're finished, you owe Lily a major apology."

Jill came back into the room, looking concerned. She reached out and patted Lily's shoulder. "He's a moron," she said. "Don't pay attention to anything he says."

"Thanks, Jill." Lily turned back to the photo of her mother and Astra. "It wasn't the horse's fault. It wasn't anybody's fault."

"I know." Jill nodded in agreement. "That's what your mom said when they pulled her and the mare out of that crevasse. She told everyone it was an accident. She begged us not to do anything to harm Astra."

"I'm really glad your dad agreed." Lily smiled at Jill. Sometimes she felt like an older sister. And since Lily didn't have any siblings, that helped.

She turned and made her way to the tack room. Astra needed to be saddled. Her training was important. And, just like her mother, Lily still believed Astra could place in the Tevis Cup—in spite of that egotistical jerk, Charlie, training her.