

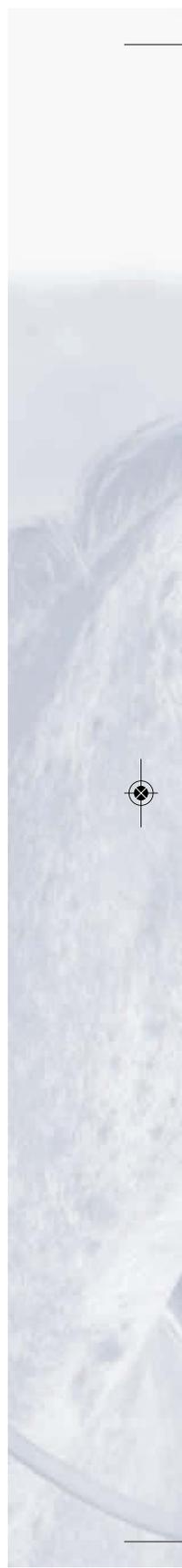
Wind Dancer

Chris Platt



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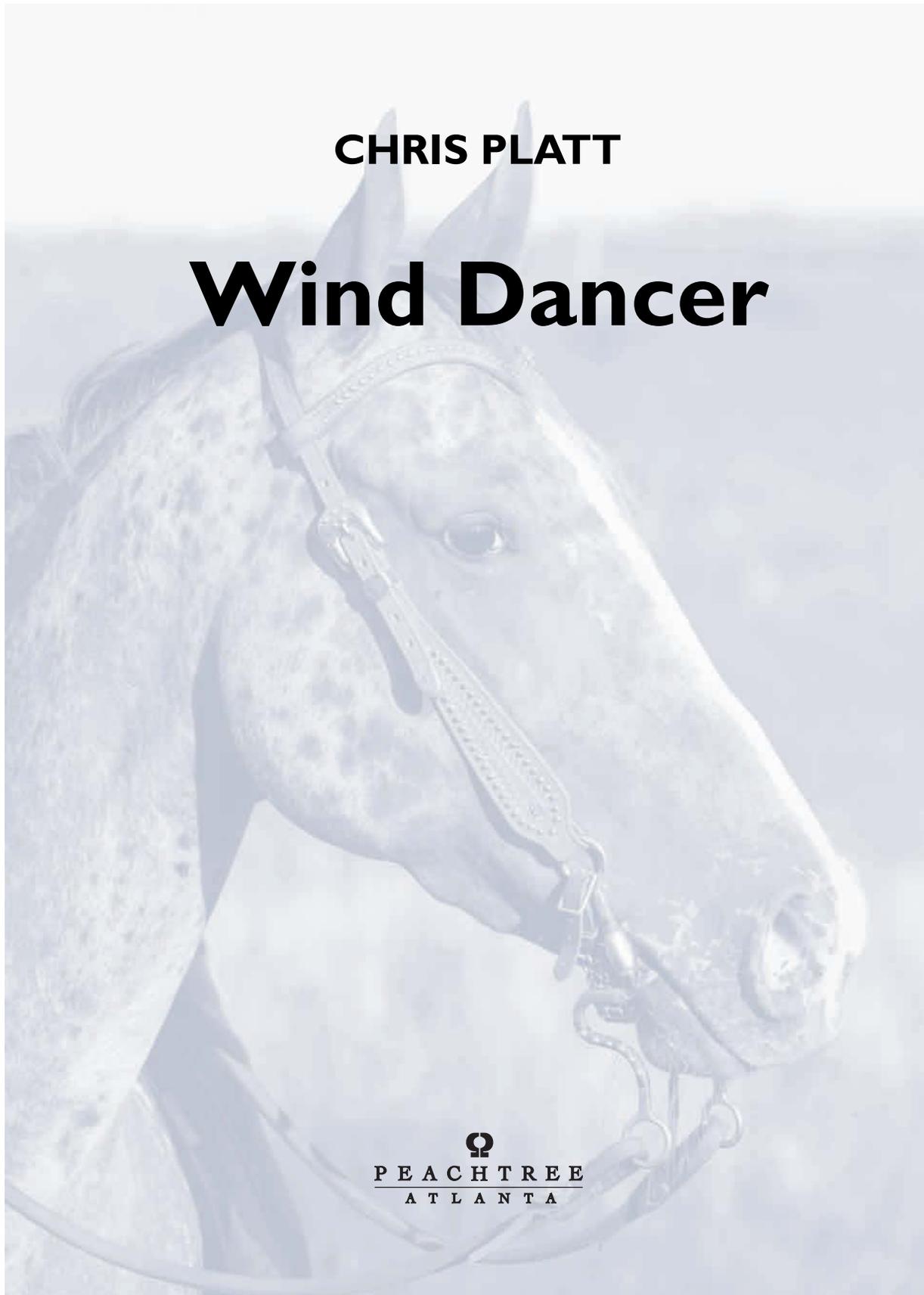






CHRIS PLATT

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Summary: Having lost her beloved pony in a traumatic accident, thirteen-year-old Ali is reluctant to help her parents care for a neglected, malnourished Appaloosa, but working with *Wind Dancer* is a good distraction from problems surrounding her brother, who recently returned from Afghanistan with a missing leg and PTSD.

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*This is for the men and women of our armed forces,
who fight for our freedom and make great sacrifices.*

*And to their families, who love them and keep the
home fires burning.*

—C. P.





One

Something's wrong." Ali flattened her nose against the school bus window, trying to catch sight of the horses. "Can you see them?" Cara asked.

Ali craned her neck, peering into the dilapidated barn at the rear of the large corner lot. It was none of her business. But the image of the skinny horses she'd last seen a week ago remained. They'd left hoofprints in her memory.

Maybe someone else would help them.

Cara's mom had already called Animal Control several weeks ago, but the only thing the officer did was examine the horses and talk to Mrs. Marshall about how to care for them.

Ali had to snort at that one. Apparently mistreated animals couldn't be taken away from their owner right away. Several inspections to document progress—or the lack thereof—were required before anything could be done. She felt sick, thinking of the horses going hungry while everyone waited for proper procedure to be followed.

Ali's mother had tried going straight to the horses' owner. Shortly after the investigation, she'd taken a tuna casserole to Mrs. Marshall, in hopes she'd get invited in and could assess the situation. But Mrs. M just grabbed the casserole, told her mother to mind her own business, and slammed the door in her face.

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Now Ali eyed the Marshall property. Here on the edge of the high mountain desert, water was in limited supply and most people didn't have much of a lawn. Mrs. M's grass was dead, dead, dead, never to rise again. She was growing a great crop of tumbleweeds and goatheads instead.

As the bus stopped to let off one of the other kids, Ali studied Mrs. Marshall's small, tan house. The paint on the siding was chipped and the porch was rickety. Had something happened to the elderly woman so she couldn't take care of things anymore? Didn't old people fall down and break hips, or something?

"Have you seen Mrs. Marshall lately?" she asked Cara.

"Nope." Cara pulled her backpack onto her lap and zipped her cell phone into the front pocket. "The neighbor kid told me she wigged out and threw rocks at the paperboy a few days ago. His mom tried to contact Mrs. Marshall's son, but they haven't heard back."

Ali tucked a strand of her long dark hair behind her ear and looked at the barn again. She didn't want to care. *But what if something had happened to the old woman and her horses?*

"Trade me places." Cara climbed over Ali and squished in next to the window. "I'm taller than you. Maybe I can see them."

Ali scooted over. "Maybe she locked the horses in the barn so she can feed them and fatten them up?" she said hopefully. But she knew in her gut that probably wasn't true. Most likely the horses were kept out of sight so the neighbors wouldn't report her again. "Mrs. Marshall seemed awfully upset that other people were getting involved. She was pretty mean to my mom."

"Those horses might be better off if someone just set them free," Cara said.

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Ali wasn't so sure. She stared out the window at the northern Nevada landscape as the bus pulled onto the road. The ground was covered in sand and sagebrush as far as the eye could see. A few pinyon pines sprouted here and there; patches of sparse desert grass grew between them. The wild mustang herds that roamed the desert had trouble surviving on such meager forage. How would a domestic horse fare?

The bus slowed, pulled onto the gravel shoulder, and stopped in a cloud of dust. Ali stood quickly, trying to shake the sad thoughts of the horses from her mind, and her foot landed squarely on someone else's. She glanced up into the blue eyes of the local veterinarian's son. His toes squished beneath her shoe before she jumped back. Ali felt her cheeks flush. She opened her mouth to apologize, but the words stuck in her throat. She backed up and let him go first, forcing Cara to wait until he was totally off the bus before they made their way down the aisle.

"Way to go, McCormick." Cara poked her in the back. "That's one way of getting his attention. But it might have been easier just to say hi."

Ali's cheeks grew even hotter. She didn't want Jamie Forrester's attention. He had been there with his dad after the accident, something she didn't need reminding of, ever. Thankfully he hardly ever rode the bus.

Ali and Cara stepped off the bus and into the warm afternoon sun. Jamie was way ahead of them, striding purposefully down the road. At school he hung out with some of the city kids, but his T-shirt, jeans, and well-worn boots screamed country boy.

"Want to come over tonight?" Cara hefted her backpack onto her shoulder. "My mom's grilling hamburgers."

Ali's stomach growled. Cara's mom could do wonders with

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that grill. "Sounds good, but I can't. We've only got a few days of school left before summer, and I've got a lot of papers to finish." She cocked her head and looked at Cara. "Don't you have homework too?"

Cara grinned. "Yes, but that doesn't mean it's going to get done."

"Don't you ever take anything seriously?" Ali asked.

Cara laughed. "Sure, but not homework."

"I don't know how you get away with it. I have to get good grades, or else. And Mom and Dad check to make sure I've done my homework every night."

"Sounds like child abuse."

Ali turned to face Cara, walking backward down the road. "It's called *discipline*. You should try it sometime." She turned again and fell back into step beside her friend. If only she could just let go like Cara and not worry about so much.

"I've got an idea," Cara said. "You're probably not going to like it though." She paused for dramatic effect. "I think we should go check on the horses."

Ali stumbled. "You're just going to walk up to the door and ask Mrs. Marshall if she's starving her horses?"

"Noooo..." Cara grinned. "We're gonna sneak into the barn after dark and see for ourselves."

Ali felt her stomach do a loop-the-loop. "You can't just sneak onto someone's property in the middle of the night!"

"Why not?" Cara gazed back in the direction of the Marshall home. "What if those horses need help?"

Ali wished she were brave enough to say yes. She *did* want to know what was up. But Cara's plan sounded too risky. "Count me out. I don't think it's a good idea. We'd be in a lot of trouble if we got caught."

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“Then let’s not get caught.” Cara punched Ali playfully in the arm. “You’re such a goody-two-shoes.”

The comment stung. So what if she tried to follow the rules? Just look where breaking the rules had gotten her brother...

“Hey, don’t look at me like that.” Cara nudged her. “It’s not like I’m going to break into Mrs. Marshall’s house and hold her for ransom. I just want to make sure those horses are okay.”

Ali knew the look on Cara’s face. It was going to be difficult to talk her out of this plan. “My mom won’t let me hang out with you if you get into trouble.”

“Look, Ali...” Cara kicked a rock and watched it skip down the road. “I see the way you look at those Appaloosas when we drive by. You need to quit trying to pretend you don’t care.” She took a deep breath. “Listen. I know you’re still upset about what happened before...you know, with the accident—”

“Cara,” Ali said in a warning tone. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“All right, all right.” Cara shrugged.

They stopped in Ali’s driveway. Out of the corner of her eye, Ali saw the curtain move in her brother’s bedroom window. She was surprised that he’d pulled himself away from his computer games long enough to glance outside.

Cara shaded her eyes and stared at the window. “Is it weird to have Danny home after so long, and after so much has happened?” she asked. “I used to have kind of a crush on him, but now he freaks me out. He’s so quiet.”

Ali wasn’t sure how to answer. Danny *had* changed since he’d gone to war. He left home ornery and full of himself,

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but now he was broken and damaged, and with a white-hot anger that could scorch the Nevada desert.

If only she could have her brother back—the way he'd been before, when they were younger. Though he was seven years older, Danny had been a really cool brother, helping her with stuff and looking out for her.

“No, it's not weird having him home,” Ali said. “I'm glad he's not in Afghanistan anymore. But it feels...” she searched for the right words, not wanting to sound disloyal to her brother. “It feels kind of like we're living with a stranger. Almost like he doesn't want anything to do with us.”

Ali thought back to the phone call telling them that Danny's vehicle had been hit by a roadside bomb. He'd lost the lower part of his left leg in the explosion. She wanted to throw up just remembering it. Danny spent several months after his surgery at an army base in Germany before being flown back to the U.S. He ended up at a military hospital on the East Coast. Her parents had been thrilled—they had a great program for amputees there.

But her brother had been less than excited. He was a difficult patient—which wasn't very different from how he was behaving now, Ali realized. She couldn't even begin to imagine what it would be like to deal with everything that had happened to him. But did he have to take it out on everybody all the time?

The thought made her feel guilty. If Danny had to put up with a missing limb, then she could put up with him being grouchy.

“What does he do all day?” Cara interrupted Ali's thoughts. “With his leg and all, he can't exactly go back to his old life.”

Ali scuffed at the dirt with the toe of her shoe. “It's complicated,” she began. “The doctors say he could do just about anything he wants if he would wear his prosthetic and do his

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therapy. But he just hides in his room most of the day. He plays on his computer a lot. Sometimes I hear him fumbling around the house after everyone else has gone to bed. He refuses to wear his prosthetic, and he doesn't want my parents to install a special elevator-type chair that would help him get up and down the stairs more easily."

"Isn't that kind of...you know, strange...having a prosthetic leg lying around?"

Ali giggled. It felt wrong to laugh about it, but really, what else could she do? Did Cara picture Danny's fake leg lying on the coffee table or propped by the front door?

"What's so funny?"

"I'm sorry." The prosthetic *had* freaked her out the first couple of times she'd seen it. "I wasn't laughing at you," she said. "Yeah, it seems odd. He hardly ever wears it. And it's strange to see Danny with part of his leg missing. But he's still my brother." She dug through her backpack, pulled a red licorice vine out of its package, and offered it to her friend.

Cara shoved the whole thing in her mouth and smiled. The red candy lined her teeth like braces. Ali laughed again and started up the front steps. "I'll text you later!"



"Is that you, Ali? Come help me with dinner."

Ali kicked off her shoes and went to the kitchen. She was struck by the dark circles under her mother's eyes. Ali hugged her, holding on for an extra long time.

"Thanks, honey, but a hug won't get you out of peeling potatoes." Her mother smiled, pointing to the pot. "Your dad will be home in an hour. We're having meatloaf, green beans, and mashed potatoes."

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Danny's favorite. Her mom was attempting to lure him downstairs with his favorite meal.

"First, can you tell your brother we'll be eating around five?" She hefted the pot of red potatoes onto the counter and got the potato peeler out of the drawer for Ali.

Ali ran up the steps two at a time, but slowed to a walk when she hit the hallway. The closer she got to her brother's door, the more she felt like she was entering forbidden territory. Like she was entering the dragon's lair.

She could hear rap music playing inside his room. She lifted her hand to knock, but then hesitated. She never knew which Danny she would get when she interrupted him. Sometimes he peeked out with a smile and it almost felt like old times. But most of the time, he jerked the door open with an irritated what-do-you-want look on his face.

She took a deep breath and banged on the door.

"What do you want?" Danny hollered.

"Mom said dinner will be ready in an hour!"

"What?"

The music got quieter; Danny must have lowered the volume a notch. Ali tried again. "MOM SAID DINNER WILL BE READY IN AN HOUR! IT'S YOUR FAVORITE...MEAT-LOAF!"

"Okay."

Ali stared at the dirt bike poster that still hung on Danny's door. The rap returned to its former volume. She shrugged and walked back down the stairs.

"I told him," she said as she picked up the peeler and grabbed the first potato out of the pot.



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An hour later, Ali, her mom, and her dad sat around the dinner table, staring at Danny's empty chair.

"I'll go get him," her father offered.

"It's okay." Ali's mom placed her hand on her husband's arm, keeping him in his seat. "He'll be down when he's ready, John. Let's not force the issue. Remember what the soldiers from the Yellow Ribbon Program said. It might take a while for him to readjust."

Her father pursed his lips the way he usually did when he didn't agree with her mother, but he said no more. They ate in silence for a few moments, the only sound the clink of utensils on plates.

"I haven't seen Mrs. Marshall's Appaloosas for a week now," Ali blurted out. She wondered why that particular piece of information had come to mind. There were a hundred other things she could have said.

Her parents stared at her. Ali pushed her food around on her plate.

"Several of the neighbors are looking into the Marshall problem, dear," her mother said. "If someone can figure out how to get through the red tape a little faster, we might be able to get her some help. But right now, she doesn't want any, so it's difficult to do anything."

"There's no need for you to worry about this, Ali," her father said. "But it's nice to see you express interest in horses again. Are you ready to talk about getting another one anytime soon?"

"No, I was just wondering if you knew anything." She pushed back her chair. "I'll take Danny his dinner."

Ali fixed Danny a plate, slipping an extra corn bread muffin onto the tray. She climbed the stairs slowly, not wanting

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to tip over the glass of milk. This time, she couldn't hear any music in the hallway.

She balanced the tray on one arm and tapped softly on the door. "I've got your dinner." Her voice bounced along the empty hallway. "Danny?" *Maybe he was asleep?* She knocked again.

"Just leave it!"

Ali flinched. Though she wanted to give the door a good kick, she set his plate on the floor instead. *She'd done him a favor bringing him his dinner. He didn't have to be mean about it.* She snatched the extra muffin off the dinner tray, crammed half of it into her mouth, and stomped to her room.

At 9:00, her mother poked her head through Ali's door. "Good night, honey," she said. "I'm turning in early if you don't need any help with your homework?"

"I'm fine. It's almost done." Ali got up to hug her, then glanced down the hall to her brother's door. An empty plate sat on the floor.

"Don't stay up too late," her mother warned. "You've got school tomorrow."

Ten minutes later, a text came from Cara.

Outside your house. Come with me to check horses.

Ali peered out the window. Cara stepped from the shadows and waved. Shaking her head, Ali quietly made her way downstairs, tiptoeing past her parents' bedroom and out the front door.

"Let's go!" Cara whispered.

"Are you nuts?" No way was she going to get caught up in this bucket of trouble. "You should go home, Cara." She



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glanced around the darkness, hoping none of the neighbors were out for a late-night walk with their dog.

Cara crossed her arms. “How can you just walk away from those horses?” she demanded. “I *know* you care about what’s happening to them.” She paused. “Besides, I don’t want to go there alone.”

An upstairs window slid open and both girls froze.

“What are you girls up to?” Danny’s suspicious voice cut through the quiet of the night. “Ali, get back in this house!”

His command echoed in her ears and she felt her hands clench. Who did he think he was, ordering her around like this? Like he suddenly cared about her?

She gave Danny a snappy salute, then grabbed Cara by the arm and ran off into the night.

