

LEVELED BOOK • Q

Chili Pepper Powder Surprise



Written by Katherine Follett
Illustrated by John Kastner

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The enormous lips tickled Trisha's outstretched palm, and she smelled a quick whiff of apple juice and horse breath before the apple she'd held up vanished with a gulp.

"He's a real thoroughbred," Adrian crowed, "the first one we've had, so I'm really excited." Trisha was even more excited—coming to her cousin Adrian's farm in Tennessee from Chicago, she had never seen a regular horse, much less a thoroughbred. It was beautiful. Its coat shimmered, glossy and smooth in the dark stable, and it snorted horsey breath through its big nostrils and tossed its mane when it heard voices. "Wanna see him walk around?"

“Are . . . are we supposed to let him out?” Trisha stammered. Trisha understood how Adrian’s father, her uncle, prized his new thoroughbred after she’d heard him bragging about it over dinner on her first night here.

“Sure, I walk him around the stables all the time,” Adrian answered. He had already unlatched the horse’s stall and was leading the horse out by the strap around its long muzzle. “We call him Pepper for short, because his full name is Chili Pepper Powder Surprise. His saddle’s right over here; you wanna see how it looks on him? Hold his reins.”

Before Trisha could protest, Adrian handed her the leather straps and went to retrieve the saddle from where it hung along the dim stable wall. Trisha froze, feeling like she was tethered to the back end of a racecar. Pepper kept dodging his rump away from Adrian as he attempted to lower the saddle onto the horse’s back. Finally the horse submitted and stood under his lumpy saddle like a beautiful princess forced to wear an ugly parka.

“Go ahead, get on,” Adrian said with a grin.

“No way,” said Trisha. Adrian had been daring her to do such things all week, like jump the fence

into the hog pen or sit in his dad's tractor. She'd always held back while he teased her, and suddenly she decided she was sick of it. "Well, if you're sure your dad won't get mad . . .," she said.

"Not if he doesn't know about it," Adrian snickered. He explained to Trisha how to put one foot in the dangling stirrup and swing the other over Pepper's back. As she eased her weight in the stirrup, Pepper sidestepped away as he had from the saddle, and she had to hop on one leg to keep with him. Finally she swung her leg over and landed hard in the saddle.





Before she could figure out what was going on, Trisha flew out the open door of the stable and into the blinding sunlight. She hadn't gotten hold of the reins, and she nearly flipped over backward, only clinging to the saddle at the last second. Her foot was tangled in the stirrup, and her hair was flying in her face so she couldn't see where she was going, and she was going terribly fast. She screamed and felt Pepper's body give a startled jump underneath her. She'd never imagined a galloping horse would be so terrifyingly rough—it always looked smooth and easy in the movies, but it was more like riding a roller coaster with no straps.

Pepper ran straight across his corral toward the fence. Trisha shrieked again, sure he would jump it, but he started around the corral instead, running and running and running. She managed to sit back up and bury her hands in his mane, but it seemed to bother or hurt him. He tossed his head, hitting her chin with the back of his neck and throwing her arms off him. If she fell or jumped, she'd be dragged by her caught foot, or she'd crack her head on the ground, or worse. Finally she managed to lie down and cling to Pepper's back while he slowed to an uneven trot, then a walk, then an uneasy standstill.

"What do you think you're doing?!" she heard her uncle holler as he ran from the house toward the corral. Pepper jerked and stepped as the shouting man approached.

"Please," she whimpered, "please don't startle him." Trisha's uncle leapt easily over the fence and walked toward the nervous horse, grunting and whistling commands she'd never heard before. He gingerly took the reins and held them tightly, offering his other hand to help Trisha down and brush the dust from her face when she finally touched the ground again. Then he held her chin, lifting her face until he saw into her eyes.

“Please don’t be mad,” Trisha pleaded. “We didn’t mean to do anything wrong—”

“Trisha, I want you to think about everything that went through your head the moment before you got on that horse. Now, are you going to look into my eyes and tell me it never occurred to you that you were doing something wrong?”

“No, sir,” Trisha said, dropping her head.

“Remember that the next time you’re about to do something you’re not allowed to do. I’m pretty sure you didn’t take out that horse and saddle him up all by yourself, especially when I saw Adrian run off and hide in the barn. You skip right under that fence and go back in the house while I fetch him.”

Trisha did as she was told, slipping through the fence and starting toward the house while her uncle ran after his son. But before she went inside, she looked back at Pepper, who grazed calmly. As she watched, he looked up at her.

“Sorry, Chili Pepper Powder Surprise,” she said, and the horse tossed his mane, as if he understood.

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