

# Thriller

By Larissa Sprecher

“It’s just the way she is,” they told him in confidential tones. “Nothing much excites her anymore. So, like, if she doesn’t go on about the scenery or the horses, it’s really not an insult.”

Trevor glanced over at the “she” in question with a look of both kindness and bemusement. From what he had gathered, Cali was a teenage cousin that this particular family was sort of looking after. They said she had had a rough life growing up, her home life was still far from ideal, and they thought a relaxing vacation with them would do her some good.

“Do you like horses?” he called over to her.

The girl was watching the horses, her bare, muscular arms crossed in front of her like a shield. She was maybe seventeen, but looked older – harder. Without looking back at him, she grunted and shrugged. “Hardly ever ridden one.”

How do people not ride horses? thought Trevor, who spent all summer on his Dad’s pristine Rocky Mountain dude ranch and never once miss the bustle of college.

About ten horses milled around in a large corral, waiting to be caught and saddled. Then his eye caught a flash of color that was not Quarter Horse... a well-built little rose-grey mare with black legs, a black mane and tail, and a striking white face. Trevor grinned. Yeah, like he was going to put ranch guests on Thriller. Who had brought in the horses anyways? The Arabian mare flipped her head saucily, then stuck her nose and tail in the air and power-trotted around the edge of the corral.

“Pretty horse,” someone said.

“Yeah, but I don’t know why she’s in there,” Trevor said, starting towards the corral. “She’s not a dumb, old – I mean, she’s not a horse I use for guests.”

When Thriller saw the girl standing by the fence, she bounced to a stop, tense and airy and gorgeous, with a bright, wide-eyed, “What the heck is that?” look all over her dished face.

Trevor rolled his eyes. The Arabian made all his other horses look bad. How could she help it?

“That’s an Arabian,” Cali said without emotion.

Having been told that she didn't know anything about horses, he looked at her in surprise. "That's right. How did you –"

"Saw it in some movie, I think."

Thriller was approaching cautiously, stretching out her arched neck, nostrils flaring, ruffled forelock giving her a rakish look.

"That's Thriller," Trevor offered, grabbing a halter and slipping into the corral. As he dropped the rope around Thriller's neck, he felt unexpectedly sorry for Cali. What would it be like to have nothing much excite you anymore? Every time he rode the Arabian mare he had just about more excitement than he could handle, which, of course, was exactly why she was not one of his guide horses.

"I'm going to throw this girl back in the pasture," he said. "You guys look at the horses and pick out one you like and when I get back we'll saddle them up."

"I want to ride that one," Cali said with decision.

Looking back, Trevor saw that the girl was pointing at Thriller. "Uh... she's not – there are lots of other pretty horses. If you don't like any in the corral I can pull more out of the pasture."

"That's not it," for a moment Cali's expression morphed to impatience. "I think she looks kinda funny with her face all caved in like that."

"Then why –"

"She looks... alive, like – like she's always having a good time."

Trevor couldn't argue with that. There was never a more cheerful or capricious horse than Thriller. If she wasn't having fun, she would find a way to make something interesting happen. He was about to say a definite "No," when a thought hit him. It was a stupid idea, he knew. Thriller was smart as could be, but not understanding of beginners. But what was that saying about what didn't kill you? Surely it made you feel more alive.

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"Now, I guess the only other thing I can say is, hold on. But you were probably going to do that anyways," Trevor ended lamely.

"No kidding," Cali said in her same steely monotone. As per usual, she sat on the mare with a kind of defiant slouch, looking almost bored, like she was thinking "So what have you got to show me that I haven't already seen before?"

After giving her all the advice he possibly could, and sandwiching her and Thriller in between her family members who were all on rock solid, uber-experienced trail horses, Trevor still understood that everything he had done was woefully inadequate. You just couldn't tell someone how to ride an Arabian or what to expect, especially from a mare – especially from Thriller. “Okay, let's roll,” he swung up onto his horse, still feeling more than a twinge of misgiving.

For a couple of miles she plodded along with the rest of the horses, content to snatch bites of grass at the walk, and nip occasionally at the horse in front of her. Trevor was almost lured into relaxing a little, although he noticed Cali still looking stony and bored. By that time they were well up into the mountains, on breathtaking, if somewhat tight switchback trails.

Suddenly – and with Thriller, things almost always happened “suddenly” – Cali gave a little yelp, and Trevor whipped around in the saddle. “What is it, Kevin?” he hollered down to the rancher who was riding at the back. Thriller had gone all tense and airy, prancing along on “tip toes,” head up, nostrils flaring, ears swiveling like she was looking for trouble – which she probably was. Trevor couldn't see a thing, but he usually couldn't. Thriller had a vivid imagination, but she also simply never missed a thing.

He looked up to see how many more switchbacks there were – only a few, but still too many. “Cali, do you want to get off?” he called, rather stupidly. After all, hadn't he wanted her to have some excitement? It wasn't even safe to get off in a place like this.

“No, I'm fine,” Cali sounded resentful, and looked even more defiant than normal, though she had grabbed a fistful of thick, black mane.

There was a clatter of rocks from below, and Trevor caught a streak of something from the corner of his eye. It was enough of an excuse – with a happy snort, Thriller wheeled around on the narrow trail and charged straight up hill.

“Hell! Kevin, take over!” Trevor shouted, digging his heels into his gelding, wishing he was on an Arabian. Not daring to take the route Thriller was taking – she was one heck of a hill horse – he spurred along the last two switchbacks, the gelding kicking rocks out into space as he rounded the corners.

By the time he got up over the edge of the hillside onto a sprawling high mountain meadow, Thriller was little more than a streak of grey with a flagging black tail. Amazingly Cali appeared to still be aboard. He was urging his gelding after the mare when she suddenly veered

off to the left into woods of massive, stately conifers, and he figured out where she was going. Her favorite trail was little more than a wildly winding deer trail, full of logs which she loved to jump, and knee-knocker trees. Even he often found himself shrieking like a banshee as Thriller whipped along the trail, and sure enough ... there came a lovely scream from Cali, tinged with just the right amount of terror and – dare he hope? – raw excitement?

Knowing where the trail curved back around towards him, he was there waiting for them. He saw Thriller's white face first, bobbing against the dark fir trunks. When the mare saw him, she bounced to an abrupt halt, finally dumping Cali, and stood there snorting at him with her forelock in a roguish tangle and wearing a cheeky, self-satisfied expression.

"You little beast," he muttered, swinging down and running to the girl. "Cali, are you all right? I'm so sorry."

But Cali leaped to her feet, grabbing Thriller's saddle to stay upright. "You idiot!" she screamed, and he wasn't sure if she was talking to him or the mare. "You could have killed me! How could – oh my God..." suddenly she was sobbing, then laughing hysterically, then screaming at him again.

Trevor couldn't have felt like more of a dunce, so he went ahead and asked, "So... did you have a good time?"

At last Cali took a deep breath to steady herself and offered him a weak smile. "Screaming," she said. "Just screaming."

Thriller wrinkled her nose impishly and started snuffling Cali for treats.

"Careful," Trevor said lamely. "She nibbles."