

BONUS MATERIAL PREVIEW MY UPCOMING BOOK

Here's another opportunity to step into the world of *In It for the Horses: A Journey from Whips to Whispers*. While crafting this book, I discovered a treasure trove of stories from my equestrian journey. Though they didn't make the final cut, these narratives are too meaningful to leave unpublished—this time as fictional short stories.

As a thank you for your support, I'm excited to share one of them with you today—a preview of my upcoming short story collection exploring the enchanting, magical world of horses.

Settle in and enjoy this tale: “Four Inches of Trust.” a story about the power of a child’s imagination and the wisdom of parents who honor it. May it spark your imagination and deepen your connection to these magnificent creatures.

Four Inches of Trust

By Nancy K. Camp

The deafening beat of the rain shook the Chrysler, as Dad flung open the rear door and lifted me from the back seat. He pulled me against his chest to carry me inside. "Buttons!" My breath hitched in terror. "We must have left him at the restaurant!"

Storm clouds blotted out the night. I saw Mom running for the house, holding her handbag over her head, her skirt billowing in the relentless wind. In an instant, my curly blonde hair became drenched, and I struggled in Dad’s arms. His hold grew tighter as he ducked under the porch's low ceiling. A bolt of lightning sliced the night sky. Thunder crashed, making the air tremble, as if the sky was crying with me.

I shrieked. "We have to go back!"

A grunt escaped Dad as he shouldered open the heavy oak door, its cast iron hinges complaining in the humid air. Raindrops scattered across Grandma's old multi-colored braided

rag rug. Inside the house, it felt dry; the storm muted, save for the wind groaning through its old walls.

"Settle down, honey," Mom said, her voice strained with exhaustion. The linen-shaded table lamp cast a warm glow, illuminating her face as she turned me to face her in the front room—her hands gripping my rain-soaked shoulders. A long shadow crept up the knotty pine paneling behind her. "We're not going back to the restaurant. It's been a long day. You need to get your pajamas on."

I stomped my feet and looked to Dad for backing. Mom shot a glance of warning—Dad's habit of spoiling me was often a source of conflict. Dad winked at her and went down on one knee, extending his arms to embrace me. I hurried to him, practicing my pout, and fell into his open arms, enjoying the familiar, warm scent of his cotton shirt mixed with the aftershave my brothers and I had given him for Christmas.

He steered me around, so my back was against his chest, and wrapped his arms around me in a gesture of protection. Feeling his steady heartbeat, I knew he had my back.

The only peril Buttons had known before this tragedy was my brother Mike's threats to snatch him and flush him down the toilet—threats that never seemed entirely like jokes.

Feeling safe in Dad's embrace, I studied the small square window in the living room. The panes reflected nothing, appearing as black as the starless night. It seemed a frail barrier between us and the thunder that boomed outside. Rain lashed against the roof, and its distinctive scent mingled with the lingering fragrances of pipe tobacco and coffee.

Images of Buttons lost and alone in the storm filled my mind, and I felt another wave of despair wash over me. Even at home in Illinois, he would be frightened and unsure of his way back. Here in Lincoln, Nebraska, where we were visiting my dad's parents, Buttons would never find me. "We have to go after him!" I cried. "We can't leave him!"

"Listen, sweetheart," Mom said, drawing a breath to compose herself. "You need to go to bed now."

"No!" I jerked away from Dad's embrace and ran to the window, leaning my elbows on the sill to steady myself as I strained to see into the dark. Raindrops streamed down the glass, blurring my view. As lightning flashed, the front yard illuminated, showing raindrops bouncing

off the flagstone sidewalk leading to the front door. What were the chances of success for Buttons, who was only four inches tall?

"Sometimes we just have to trust everything will be okay," Dad said, standing up with a calm that contrasted with my panic and Mom's exhaustion.

I pulled myself up tall and grabbed the flashlight Grandpa kept on the end table by the window. I dodged my mother, who stepped to block me from running to the front door, and grasped the black iron handle, tugging with all my might. The least I could do was go to the side of the road with a light and call for Buttons to help him find his way. The door groaned as it started to open, then slammed shut with such force the flashlight fell on the rug.

A crack of thunder highlighted the power of my mother's voice: "That's enough. Bed. Now."

My father, who had slipped out of the room unnoticed, came back and gestured towards my mother. "Go on to bed," he said. Then he turned and reported to me. "I called the restaurant. Buttons left twenty minutes ago. He should be here soon."

I wanted to believe him. "But it's raining so hard. How will he find us?"

Dad placed a finger on my tear-streaked cheek. "He'll be okay. He's a horse."

Dad was right. We both knew horses were magical. That's why I loved them so much. I thought of the horses in my life: Savage, my rearing Breyer stallion and protector; Misty, the playful pony in my favorite books by Marguerite Henry; and Cindy and Ginger, the ponies who lived just a mile from my house. At every opportunity, I took carrot and apple treats to them and spent hours sitting on the cool grass outside their fence, watching them graze, daydreaming about a horse of my own.

Of course, Buttons was magical, and I should trust he would return, even against all odds, even in this fierce high plains Nebraska thunderstorm.

I marched back to the end of the big leather couch, which smelled like my grandfather's pipe, and put my elbows on the windowsill, hoping I might see Buttons trotting along the stone path toward the front door.

Dad sat paging through a magazine he'd picked up from the wood slab coffee table. The lamp cast a faint light over the text. The hour was past ten. I laid my arm along the windowsill and rested my head as my eyes grew heavy. The storm was receding; the lightning losing its

intensity and the thunder rumbling more distantly. The steady drumming of the rain lulled me toward sleep.

As the minutes passed, doubt crept in. Maybe Buttons was gone forever. Maybe this time the magic wasn't strong enough. My eyelids grew heavier, and I felt myself starting to give up hope. Would I have to accept that my tiny friend had simply vanished in the storm?

I had nearly surrendered to sleep when I heard Dad's slippers shuffle to the front door. "Look." He pretended to pick something off the floor. Cradling it carefully, he walked to me.

Groggy, I sat up and took my little horse from the reassuring firmness of my father's hand.

"He's cold," Dad said. "We'd better get him to bed."

With one arm, I embraced my dad's neck and nestled my face in his comforting smell. He carried us to the bedroom where my brothers slept and laid me on my cot. He checked that my little horse was safe under the blanket before he tucked me in. I was asleep by the time he closed the bedroom door.

A light rain tapped the roof in a gentle, steady rhythm.