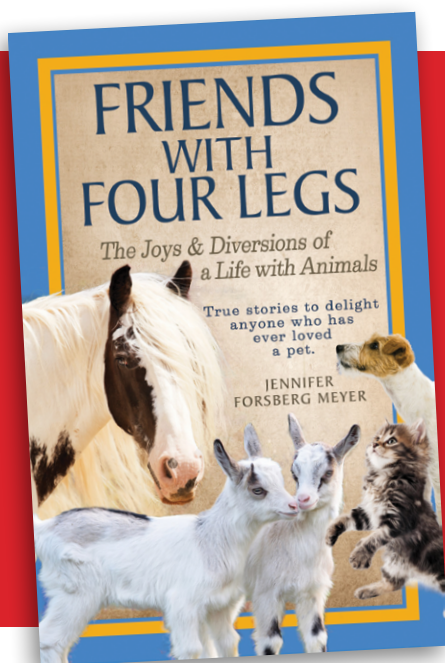


This file contains three horse-related chapters from **Friends With Four Legs**:  
*The Waiting Game, Sure-Footed Saviors, Rest in Peace, Sweet Mare*



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## The Waiting Game

“Can you get a urine sample?”

It was my veterinarian on the phone, catching me by surprise.

“I think so,” I replied, wondering how I would accomplish this with a pony.

“It takes some patience,” he added.

Oh. I envisioned myself sitting out in the pasture all day, waiting for nature to call, knowing that a watched pot never boils.

Still, I would try. Brego, my daughter’s black gelding, had turned out to be a wonderful child’s mount. He had safely carried her over many a jump and through all sorts of horseback activities. Although he didn’t seem sick, he was urinating frequently, and the vet wanted to rule out anything serious. That’s what the urinalysis—and a blood panel—would do.

The vet would draw the blood when he arrived; my job in the meantime was to capture the urine. Somehow.

I grabbed a clean jar and a notebook, and headed out to the horse pasture. I needed the notebook because, as bad luck had it, I was on deadline for an assignment

that very morning. Sitting out in the pasture, I would need to finish up my work the old-fashioned way—by hand, on the notebook.

Anything for you, Brego.

I found a box to sit on and drew it up in the shade of the horses' loafing shed. The May day was pleasant, warm but not hot. The sun shone, birds chirped. I began to feel this might be the perfect place to work.

Until the animals crowded in.

First, it was Brego himself, checking me out. His soft, whiskery muzzle traced a line from my notebook, up my arm, over my head, back to the notebook. His breath, warm and fragrant, blew over me. Finally, his nosing finished, he headed back to his stall, where the remaining bits of his breakfast hay beckoned.

I glanced back at the last paragraph on my notebook. Where was I? Before I could proceed, Buddy, our Saanen goat, wandered over to begin his own in-your-face investigation. I pondered the options for shooing him away, none of them promising.

Then, abruptly, the pony walked out of his stall, found a comfortable spot near his manure pile, and "dropped" (a horseman's term for preparing to urinate). I scrambled for the jar, then stood at hand, poised for action.

False alarm. Brego wandered back into his stall, swishing his tail.

I returned to my sitting box, where Buddy was nibbling a corner of my notebook. "Go, Buddy!" I commanded, pointing to a far corner of the pasture. He regarded me with calm, quizzical eyes, like a biologist examining a newly discovered species.

"Buddy, go!" I repeated. His amber eyes closed slowly, then opened; nothing else moved.

As if to help, the pony stepped over to us and pinned his ears, sending Buddy scurrying. Then Brego began a new, more careful inspection of me. His manner said, "You must have treats, somewhere." Finding none, he walked away, then paused. I jumped up, jar in hand. The goat returned to head me off, the hair along his back standing in a rigid line. (Buddy always fancied himself the horses' protector. In this moment, he saw me as an aggressor who must be stopped.)

"Buddy!" I exclaimed, pushing him away, my eyes fixed on Brego. The pony stood indecisively for a moment, then strolled over to the water tank for a drink.

Newly hopeful, I returned to my box and sat down. It couldn't be long now. Brego headed back over to conduct his third inspection, muzzle dripping water. I shooed him away.

Then Killian, my own riding horse, emerged from his stall, sighing contentedly. He glanced about, assessing the situation, then walked to the water tank for a drink.

The goat, meanwhile, was rooted at my elbow, his head about level with mine. He urped, flexed his jaw, and began chewing the cud he had just brought up from his gut. I watched, fascinated, as his weird little teeth moved back and forth.

Brego wandered over and tried to lip my hair. I waved him back into his stall. He came out again, determined to wipe his now-muddy muzzle on my manuscript. He succeeded. Then he walked forward, sniffing the ground purposefully. This is it! I

jumped up, dropped the notebook, grabbed the jar, pushed the goat away.

Nature did indeed call, but it wasn't what I had been waiting for. Brego stepped away from the moist, fragrant pile and returned to his stall. I sat back down and tried to concentrate on my work. For a moment, I did. Then I heard the sound of urinating. I was missing it! I leaped and turned, and...it was Buddy, not Brego.

I sat back down. Time passed. I frowned at my smudgy notebook.

Then, at last, it happened. Brego walked out, paused, and assumed the position. I jumped up one final time, gripping the jar. The stream began; I caught some of it, marveling at its force. (Mental note: Next time, taller jar.)

When the vet arrived later that day, I presented the jar with pride. Later still, I learned the tests were normal; the pony, fine. I went on to finish the manuscript I had been working on, then smiled as I tucked away the slobber-smears that became the basis for my next story—and this chapter.

## Chapter 5: Sure-Footed Saviors

How important is the right kind of horse? When it comes to your family, it's all-important. This proved true in the early 1990s, when my husband's new Quarter Horse was put to the test.

Back then, Hank and I each had a horse of our own. Though my husband had rarely ridden before meeting me, his natural athleticism and empathy with animals enabled him to bond well with Dusty, a quiet, mousy-dun Quarter Horse gelding I had hand-picked to be his first mount. At 16.1 hands high and well-muscled, Dusty was imposing to look at but friendly, unflappable, and easy to ride. Perfect for a beginner.

My equine partner was Gunner, another good-natured Quarter Horse. A sleek, 16-hand-high chestnut with a flaxen mane and tail, Gunner was a looker who made my heart go pitty-pat. Solid under saddle, he was as good out on the trail as he was practicing endless circles in the arena.

The four of us—Hank on Dusty and I on Gunner—had enjoyed a few rides together around our rural neighborhood. Then my longtime friend and farrier, Ray Fine, offered to take us on one of his signature horse-camping trips.

I jumped at the chance. Had I known then what I know now, I also would've grilled Ray about the difficulty of our intended route. These days, I could've gone online and discovered it was recommended exclusively "for the fit and brave." Instead, blissfully ignorant, I began preparations for our excursion to beautiful Raymond Lake, just off the Pacific Crest Trail in the Mokelumne Wilderness of the Sierra Nevada.

When we unloaded our horses at the trailhead that lovely summer morning, everything was just as I had envisioned it. Green meadows rolled out in every direction, with towering cottonwood trees and broad dirt paths. Only, as I soon discovered, this

was just the staging area. Our real journey—the part for which T-shirts (“I Survived A Ray Fine Trail Ride”) actually exist—was a series of high-mountain switchbacks. These cut into the steep sides of the volcanic rock that leads up to the 9,000-foot-elevation lake, and they are heart-stopping. They reminded me of the walls of the Grand Canyon. They also made me wish I and my novice-level-equestrian husband were riding sure-footed mules. Yes, our geldings were good guys, but still...mules stick like glue.

And I noted that Ray himself was riding a mule.

The trail on those switchbacks had to be wider than eighteen inches, but that’s how I remember it. I’m also sure the drop-off at the trail’s edge wasn’t a sheer plunge of five hundred feet, but that’s what I still see in my mind’s eye, decades later.

Talk about high anxiety. Forget the scenery; my eyes were glued to the trail, my mind yammering nonstop. Will the horses see that rock coming up? (No room for stumbling, here.) Will they cross this trickle of water without side-stepping? (Nowhere to step.) Will they keep their composure if—heaven forbid!—we meet back-pack-laden hikers coming the opposite way?

Over the pounding of my heart, I could hear Hank chatting amiably with Ray. Oblivious to all that could go wrong, he was simply enjoying the fresh air, the scenic vistas, the companionship of his horse. As the moments stretched into what seemed an eternity, I began to appreciate his horse even more than he did. Dusty was a trouper, all right. The ideal beginner’s mount. And Gunner was equally solid. I tried to concentrate on this thought, carefully avoiding words like startle, plummet, and airlift.

At one point, the pack mule Ray was leading just in front of Hank and Dusty slipped while switching back to the next bit of trail. I watched the animal’s hind legs scramble over the edge for an instant before regaining purchase on the narrow path. I learned that time really does slow down at such moments. Today, I can still picture those dislodged stones making their slow-motion tumble over the edge and cascading down, down, d-o-w-n....

When we finally reached the top, my relief was a surge of adrenaline. We made it! But the jubilation wilted at the realization there was no way of return other than back over those cliffsides. Still, I managed to enjoy the last, easy mile to Raymond Lake, our fireside meal, and the overnight stay in pup tents.

The next morning, after standing tied all night, the horses were fresh. Mine, alarmingly, was bucking in place. But both Dusty and Gunner settled to their work like pros, and we made the return trip without mishap—other than my palpitations.

For years after, Ray and his wife, Linda, split their sides telling about the time Ray took the fancy-pants journalist on a trail ride—and about scared the pants off her. Hank is never a part of this narrative, and for that I’m grateful. It means he felt so safe and secure on his horse, it never occurred to him to worry.

Yes, we survived a Ray Fine trail ride, thanks to Ray himself and our own good geldings. For being just as reliable as mules that day, thank you, Gunner. Thank you, Dusty.

## Chapter 8: Rest in Peace, Sweet Mare

It was just a kink in the uppermost branch of a gray pine tree, but it brought me up short. The pine stands over the grave of a special horse, and the reason the kink shocked me is the core of an unusual tale.

Tigress, my first horse, came into my life exactly when I needed her. I was a shy, intense thirteen-year-old, the proverbial ugly duckling. She was a green-broke Thoroughbred filly, to my young eyes ravishingly beautiful. With her, who cared if I never went out on a date, never had a boyfriend, never got married—all distinct possibilities to me at the time. I had Tigress!

Mostly a self-taught equestrian at that point, I could easily have run into trouble with her. Fortunately, Tigress was so forgiving, it didn't matter. She put up with me while I figured things out. She was timid, but willing and honest. She never said no to me out of defiance, orneriness, or guile. She sometimes said I can't out of fear or confusion, but never I won't or You can't make me.

Still, her timidity could be exasperating. Once, a friend and I hauled her to a local hunter/jumper show in a two-horse trailer with no divider. At the show, with strange sounds and smells to excite and intimidate her, Tigress decided not to back out of the trailer. Who knew what might lurk back there, waiting for her as she stepped blindly in reverse? Better to just stand her ground, or—hey! Look! I can just turn right around, like this!

Around she squeezed, her long Thoroughbred body bulging out the sides of the older wooden trailer. Then out she popped, her expression saying, "See? Much safer this way." My friend Teresa, a knowledgeable horse person, was appalled.

Yet Tigress could be brave when it mattered. A year or so after the trailer episode, as houses began to spring up around our rural neighborhood, I was dismayed when a new neighbor's pasture cut off our usual trail up the hillside. His fence was three-rail wood board, painted white, just under four feet high. One day, I was cantering Tigress along the path that led to the old trail, thinking with annoyance that we would soon have to stop.

But then, on a whim, I decided not to stop. As we approached the fence, I simply sat deeper and closed my legs around her. Tigress, pleased with this turn of events, sprang over the fence into our neighbor's field. We cantered the path as it led across the pasture, then bounded right over the fence on the other side, continuing up the hill at a gallop.

Never had I felt such exhilaration! Tigress and I were masters of the universe: bold, determined, unstoppable. We could go anywhere, do anything.

It was a glorious feeling for a fifteen-year-old girl.

Tigress remained mine as I transitioned into adulthood. And, when my husband and I eventually moved onto our own twenty acres, Tigress came with us.

Then, one chilly February morning years later, when Tigress was twenty-five, I found her on the ground, colicking. The veterinarian diagnosed an enterolith, a mineral-based stone growing in her gut and now blocking her colon. He administered

mineral oil and a painkiller, and told me to keep her moving.

Not thinking clearly, I led her out onto the dirt road that borders our acreage, when I should have stayed closer to home. After about an eighth of a mile, she simply stopped and would go no farther, forward or back. She knew more than I did, perhaps more even than the vet.

I left her there and sprinted back to the house to summon the vet again. As I implored him to return at once, I could see her standing patiently, way out on the road, wearing her blue blanket.

When the vet arrived, I made that difficult decision, the one every animal lover dreads. I didn't want to put her through surgery at her age, so I agreed to let the vet put her down.

After he had left, I walked back to the house, stepped inside, and doubled over, keening a grief sharper than any I had felt in my life to that point. I think I was grieving for my lost childhood as much as for my sweet mare. Tigress had been my living, breathing link to those happy years. She had helped me to find myself; now, she was gone.

I found a backhoe driver willing to come that same day, retrieve her from the road, and bury her on our property. As he lowered her into the grave, her head dangled at an odd angle. I wanted to ask him to let me straighten out the kink in her neck, but I knew he was in a hurry—he was doing me a huge favor as it was. Plus, I knew it didn't really matter, anyway: her essence was gone.

Still, the thought of her positioned awkwardly continued to bother me. I finally consoled myself with the thought that I would plant a tree over the spot where her head now lay, and the roots of the tree would reach down and somehow (thinking in that odd way we sometimes do in times of extreme grief) make everything okay.

By the time spring arrived that year, there was indeed a tree growing on that spot. But I hadn't planted it. It was a native gray pine, volunteering its services for this duty.

Twenty years later, the pine's trunk measured about eight inches in diameter, almost large enough to support the commemorative plaque I planned to place on it. And when I glanced to the top of the tree that day, there was that kink. The kink, now removed from my mare and held aloft in the tree.

Or so it seemed to me, in that odd way of thinking that now reassures me my Tigress is truly resting in peace.

