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blind rescue horse
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Joey: How a Blind Rescue Horse Helped Others Learn to See

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JOEY'S TIME AT HOPE REINS is presented as accurately as possible, based on interviews and memories of those involved with his rescue, care, and training. Some names and identifying details of people have been changed out of respect for their privacy or are composites of several different individuals' experiences. A few events and timelines have been combined and compressed for brevity, with certain liberties taken to tell a more cohesive story. As I write this, a number of the horses that were part of Joey's story still reside at Hope Reins.

Jennifer Marshall Bleskey

Just ask the animals, and they will teach you.

Ask the birds of the sky, and they will tell you.

Speak to the earth, and it will instruct you.

JOB 12:7-8



PROLOGUE

THE RAIN CAME DOWN in sheets as Penny turned onto the long gravel drive she shared with a neighboring horse farm. After two months away from her Virginia home while she cared for her dying mother in Florida, the sprawling green pasture was a welcome sight. As she made her way up the drive, a group of horses came into view.

That's odd, she thought. *What are they doing outside in such a terrible storm?* Slowing down ever so slightly, she leaned forward, straining to see through the rain. Suddenly, her eyes widened.

"Oh my goodness!" she gasped. Slamming on the brakes, she quickly turned her pickup around and drove straight up the farm's private drive, blatantly ignoring the No Trespassing sign.

Throwing open the metal gate, she trudged through the mud and muck toward the herd of horses. When she got within a few yards of them, she stopped dead in her tracks. The horses

were completely emaciated, some barely able to stand. Next to them, beneath an ancient oak, two horses lay motionless, their manes matted with mud, their midsections grotesquely inverted. Her stomach churned.

What happened here?

Taking shelter under the tree, she pulled out her phone and dialed 9-1-1.

“9-1-1, what’s your emergency?”

“Yes, I’m calling from the Nash farm off US 60 in Powhatan County,” Penny began, her voice shaking. “There are several badly emaciated horses out in the field, and some of them appear to be dead.”

“How many dead horses are there?” the operator asked matter-of-factly.

“At least two,” she replied, glancing around the pasture, her eyes settling on the stables off in the distance.

“Okay, ma’am, someone from the sheriff’s department and animal control will be there shortly.”

After thanking the dispatcher, Penny tucked her phone into her coat pocket and headed toward the stables. “Please, God, don’t let there be any more like these in there,” she prayed.

Cold rain pelted her face as she forced her legs to carry her toward the open-air stalls at the top of a gentle hill. Off to the side stood a ranch-style house. One of the shutters hung askew, and the lower portion of a window had been boarded up.

She couldn’t remember the last time she had seen the owner—a man who made a hobby of collecting horses he thought he could sell at a higher price.

Did he just get tired of it and take off? Her mind wandered back to the dead and dying animals in the pasture. *How could anyone do that?*

Wrapping her raincoat tightly around her, she quickened her pace. A fire burned in her stomach. Never had she felt so angry. As she neared the stables, she saw that empty feedboxes dotted the area and the November grass was almost bare. *When was the last time these poor animals were fed?*

When she finally reached the four wooden stalls, she took a deep breath and willed herself to look inside. All of them were empty. *Thank God*, she breathed. Then, just as she was about to turn and leave, she saw a hoof sticking out from behind the end stall.

“No, no, no, no, no . . .” she begged as she ran to the fallen horse.

She dropped to her knees, mud and manure seeping into her jeans. Her heart caught in her throat. She recognized the familiar short blond tail of the horse she had loved to visit through the adjoining fence. His sweet personality reminded her of a horse she had ridden as a child. Tears welling in her eyes, she gingerly touched the horse’s side. Each rib protruded beneath the skin. She quickly jerked her hand away. The rain fell harder now, and muddy streaks flowed down the animal’s body, revealing glimpses of the white-and-black polka-dotted coat hidden beneath the crusted-on mud and filth.

Three dead, she lamented.

The silence was broken by the sound of the front gate slamming shut. The authorities had arrived. Penny stood and headed back down to the pasture to meet them. She was soaked from head to foot and smelled of manure, but she didn’t care.

Animal control workers had already begun guiding weak horses onto trailers, while others unloaded equipment to transport the dead. As she stood shivering in the rain while answering

the sheriff's questions, a shout pierced the melancholy air. "Hey! This one is still alive!"

Penny dashed back to the stalls, where an animal control officer held his hand against the fallen horse's spotted nose.

"Are you sure?" she asked eagerly.

The young officer looked up at her, smiling. Rain dripped from his blue cap.

"Yes. I can feel air coming from his nostrils, and I can hear a faint heartbeat."

"Oh, thank God!" she said, fighting back tears.

"Ma'am, do you know the owner of this farm?" the sheriff asked.

Penny heard his question, but she couldn't take her eyes off the horse. He was alive! The sweet creature was still alive.

"Ma'am?" The sheriff looked at Penny's face and tried again. "Do you know this horse?"

For the second time in less than an hour, Penny dropped to her knees beside the animal.

"I do," she said, gently touching the horse's face, realizing she would likely never see him again. "His name is Joey."



CHAPTER I

KIM TSCHIRRET HAD no idea if she was doing the right thing. She anxiously balled her hands into fists in her jacket pockets and chewed her bottom lip as she waited in the barn.

“I’m so nervous,” she whispered to her friend Barb Foulkrod, who had generously agreed to make the early morning drive from North Carolina to Virginia to pick up the horse Kim couldn’t stop talking about. When they arrived, Tom Comer, the owner of the sprawling Virginia farm, greeted them warmly. Tom had his own horses but also fostered animals in need for the Equine Rescue League.

Barb laid a calming hand on Kim’s back. She and Kim, both in their early forties and both wearing their blonde hair in low ponytails, could have easily passed for sisters.

“Trust your gut, Kim,” she whispered back.

Trust. Barb made it sound so easy.

In theory, giving a permanent home to a recently rescued horse was a no-brainer. After all, the horse therapy ranch Kim owned in Raleigh needed more horses. But *this* horse? Maybe she *had* been too rash.

When the stable door opened, out stepped the most beautiful, albeit terribly thin, horse Kim had ever seen. Her breath caught as she inhaled. He was magnificent. Head held high. Creamy blond mane blowing in the gentle breeze. He looked positively regal.

“Oh my . . .” she breathed out.

She had seen Appaloosas before. In fact, there was another one waiting impatiently in the borrowed horse trailer parked in the driveway. She had always loved the breed, with their richly spotted coats, freckled noses, and humanlike eyes, but she had never seen one like this before. A leopard Appaloosa, his white coat was dotted with hundreds of black ink spots. Smaller ones packed close together in the front, while larger ones spread out around the back. His markings reminded Kim of a Dalmatian’s coat.

“Well, here he is,” Tom announced. “Meet Joey.”

Kim and Barb slowly approached, and Kim gently held her hand under the horse’s nose in a nonthreatening greeting. “Hi, Joey. It’s nice to meet you.”

The Appaloosa breathed in her scent, then exhaled his greeting. His pink-and-black-freckled lips rooted around her closed fist, looking for hidden tidbits. Kim reached up to stroke his large cheek, her index finger stopping on several different-sized spots—a large one with a deep black center surrounded by a lighter ring, a medium-sized pear-shaped one, and finally several small ones that all blended together, turning a patch of his white coat gray.

“You are so beautiful,” she said, moving closer.

Joey lowered his head, his cheek briefly touching hers. Kim drew in a quick breath. The movement, the moment, felt almost reverent. Woman and horse stood together for several heartbeats before Joey lowered his head further in search of a clump of grass.

“Tom, thank you so much for thinking of us,” Kim said. “I still don’t know if we’re ready for this, but there’s just something about this one—I can almost feel it.”

Tom nodded. “Trust me, I get it. This boy is special, no doubt about it. But I have to confess, you were actually the seventh place I called that day. I reached out to every contact I have, but nobody wanted him. ‘Too much work,’ everyone said.”

Kim felt a pang of fear. *Was* it going to be too much work? She had spoken several times to Tom since that first call, asking countless questions about Joey’s care. But did she really have any idea what she was getting into? Probably not. Yet all she had to do was look at him. She couldn’t imagine not taking him now.

“I honestly thought about just keeping him here,” Tom continued. “I mean, we have the room and all.” He motioned to the large stable and pastures behind him. “But after I saw him with my kids, saw what he was capable of, I knew that he belonged somewhere he could make a real difference. When my friend Eddie told me about your ranch, I knew that’s where Joey needed to be.”

Kim had been praying for weeks over this horse, asking God if she was doing the right thing for Hope Reins, the equine therapy ranch she had started just over a year ago. Now, in February 2011, they already had eight horses and three dozen volunteers, but when Tom called her out of the blue to tell her

about Joey, she agreed to take him, sight unseen—something she'd *never* done before.

Each of the other horses at Hope Reins had been carefully chosen. Potential horses were observed and discussed by the staff for days—sometimes weeks or months—before they were selected as candidates for the herd, a unique group comprised of several horses who had been rescued from dire situations. Both from countless hours of research and from personal experience, Kim had found that when troubled or hurting children worked with horses who had also known pain or abuse, a deep and profound bond was often formed.

However, since the ranch was dedicated to pairing horses with hurting children, Kim had to be sure that a horse would work well with children before taking it on, and not every horse met that standard.

Over the past few months, Kim had passed on several horses because they did not have the temperament needed to work one-on-one with a child. If a horse was too aggressive, too fearful, or in need of more rehab than Kim and her helpers could handle, it didn't make the cut. It always broke her heart to say no to a horse, but she had to consider the welfare of the children. She couldn't afford to take a horse on a whim.

When Tom called and mentioned that his five-year-old was riding Joey bareback, Kim agreed to take him on the spot. Still, the Appaloosa had unique needs of his own that concerned the Hope Reins board of directors. *Who could blame them?* Kim thought. It wasn't every day you found yourself caring for a blind horse.

Blind.

The word *had* given Kim pause. Still, Joey needed a home, and for some reason she couldn't explain, she felt strongly that

Hope Reins needed Joey. So, even though she had no idea how they would raise the three thousand dollars they would need every year for his basic care, she had readily agreed to take him.

Joey's head was lowered over a clump of grass, his lips nibbling individual blades. Barb and Kim listened to Tom recount how he became involved with Joey. "So you've had Joey for two months?" Barb asked.

"That's right. When he was first rescued, Joey needed a lot of rehab," Tom said, absently stroking Joey's back. "He initially stayed with a vet who runs a foster ranch. She was able to get a little bit of weight back on him. She's also the one who realized he's blind."

"Was the blindness due to malnourishment?"

Tom shrugged his shoulders. "Not really sure. Vet said that this breed is pretty susceptible to eye problems—cataracts and moon blindness and such. She sees evidence of both in Joey."

Kim searched Joey's almond-shaped eyes. He didn't look different from any other horse she had seen. His eyes weren't cloudy, nor were they fixed on some point beyond her. Instead, his eyes—his gaze—seemed to meet her own. But Kim also knew looks could be deceiving. Some scars go unseen.

"Last time we spoke, you mentioned that Joey had been a champion jumper. Can you tell me any more about that?" Kim asked, eager to learn as much as possible about her soon-to-be resident.

Joey took several steps forward to another patch of grass while Tom told Kim and Barb everything he knew about Joey's backstory. A friend had seen Joey compete years ago as a skilled jumper and well-decorated competitor in show hunting and dressage, and he knew Joey and his rider were on their way

to qualifying for the Olympics. But then the horse suffered an injury that ended his competitive career. Eventually, Joey was sold to a mother and daughter who boarded him at the friend's stable.

Tom reached into his pocket and pulled out a carrot chunk. He clucked his tongue. Joey lifted his large head and gingerly took the offered treat.

"Anyway, I guess after a couple years, the woman got divorced and they had to sell Joey. Sometime after that he ended up with the horse hoarder. That's pretty much all I know."

Kim could have listened to Tom talk about Joey all day, but they still had a three-hour drive ahead of them and she wanted to unload the new horses before dark.

Kim wished she had more time to ask Tom about Joey's day-to-day care. He had given her several helpful tips on the phone; suggestions like pairing Joey with a companion horse as soon as possible, moving hay boxes and water troughs next to the fence so he wouldn't walk into them, and walking him along the perimeter of his pasture. But was it enough?

Kim took a deep breath. "You have no idea how grateful we are for all you have done. Please come visit us at Hope Reins sometime."

"I'd like that," Tom said, handing Joey's lead rope to Kim and giving Joey a final scratch between his ears. "He's all yours."

A moment of fear gripped Kim. A chant of what-ifs in her mind almost loosened her hand on the rope. As if sensing Kim's panic, Barb put her arm around her friend. *Yes*, Kim thought, *I can do this*.

As they approached the horse trailer, the sound of stomping hooves and a loud, agitated whinny from inside made them abruptly stop. Joey's ears flew forward as if to say, *What's that?*

“That’s Speckles,” Kim offered. “He’s an Appaloosa, too, but a rather unhappy one at the moment, it seems. I’m sure he’ll settle down once we get on our way.” *At least I hope so.* The truth was that Speckles had been nothing but difficult since she and Barb picked him up. She hoped she wasn’t wrong about that one.

Once Joey was secured in the trailer, while he and Speckles assessed one another, Tom patted Joey’s rump.

“Go do lots of good, Joey.”

Yes, Kim thought as the farm disappeared behind them, Joey has quite a story.

Thankfully, it hadn’t ended too soon.