

## A MARE CALLED LUCKY

by H. J. Hutchins

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“I THINK I just bought a blind horse.”

Jessie sat on the mare’s warm, sleek back and watched her dad slowly wave his cowboy hat before the horse’s eyes. At first she thought it was one of his corny jokes. When he’d called her out to the corral a half hour ago, he’d said there was a giant gopher in there—the strangest-looking animal he’d ever seen.

Well, there had been an animal in the corral, all right, but not a giant gopher. It was a horse, a lovely mare. She was far younger than Blackie, the ancient, stubborn gelding Jessie normally rode, but not as headstrong as her dad’s cattle horse, Windego. Jessie had fallen in love with this perfect buckskin mare in about two seconds flat.

“It’s not a gopher?” her dad had asked in mock amazement. “But it’s the right color—that nice, tawny brown.”

Sometimes her dad’s corny lines drove Jessie crazy. And now he was saying this perfect mare couldn’t see. It had to be another one of his jokes...but it wasn’t very funny.

“This mare is blind. She won’t go any faster than a walk because she’s scared to.”

Jessie’s dad stepped back, shaking his head in dismay at his horse-trading abilities.

Jessie still didn’t want to believe it. She urged the mare forward again, clucking her tongue and nudging the sleek, light-brown sides with her heels. “Hee-ya!” she yelled, hoping against hope that the horse would spring forward. But she didn’t. Jessie slid off the mare’s back and walked to her head. She passed her hand before the clear brown eyes. Her dad was right. The most perfect mare in the world couldn’t see.

After supper, Jessie and her mom went out to the corral and took the mare a bucket of oats. Jessie’s dad was talking on the phone. He soon came out to join them.

“Sanders says he didn’t know the mare was blind,” he said.

“The man you bought her from?” asked Jessie’s mom. “How could he not have known?”

“She was with some other horses at a sale last spring,” said Jessie’s dad.

“He wanted the other horses, so he took her, too. He didn’t pay much attention to her because she was young. He turned her out into his far pasture for the winter. When he brought her up with the others last week, she was so gentle, he decided to sell her without training her. He says if I take her down and sell her as horse meat, he’ll give me my money back.”

Horse meat, thought Jessie. The most perfect mare in the world killed for horse meat!

“No,” said Jessie quickly. “It’s O.K. I can ride Blackie for lots more years. We can keep this mare to have foals.”

Jessie’s dad shook his head. “I phoned the vet,” he said. “The blindness could be hereditary—that means her foals could be born blind as well. We can’t keep a blind mare that has blind foals. We don’t have enough pasture. Everything on this farm has to pay its way—either by producing something we can sell or by helping out with the work. It’s the only way we can keep the farm going.”

“That’s true, Jessie,” said her mother sadly. “We can keep Blackie because he’s already worked hard for us, but any new horse we get must be able to work cattle or have foals that can learn.”

“But do you know for sure her foals will be blind?” Jessie pressed. “Couldn’t something have happened to make her blind?”

“She might have had a bad infection—that would mean she’d still have healthy foals,” Jessie’s dad admitted. “But her eyes look normal, so there’s no way of telling.”

“Couldn’t we at least try and see?” asked Jessie.

Her dad looked hard at Jessie from beneath the rim of his cowboy hat. “If we let her have a foal and it’s born blind, I’ll have to sell them both as horse meat for very little money. Both of them, Jessie. It might be easier just to take the mare away now.”

Jessie looked at the mare’s blind, trusting eyes. “She deserves a chance,” Jessie said.

Her dad glanced at Jessie’s mom and then turned back to Jessie.

“All right,” he said. “So long as you understand what might have to be done, we’ll give her that chance.”

Jessie wrapped her arms around the mare’s warm neck. “We’ll call her Lucky,” she said.

That summer, Jessie and Lucky became friends. Jessie didn’t care that she couldn’t ride Lucky a million miles an hour up and down the coulee, as she had always dreamed of riding her own horse. Sometimes she just rode at a walk around the pasture. Sometimes she braided Lucky’s mane and tail and curried her to a gloss. Sometimes Jessie just lay on Lucky’s broad back and watched hawks soar while Lucky grazed.

When cold weather came, Jessie herself took Lucky out to the far pasture to winter with Blackie and Windego. She was afraid the two bigger horses might pick on the mare, but the opposite happened. When Lucky wandered away from the other two, she would raise her head and nicker, and Blackie and Windego would whinny back until she found them again. During the long evenings, Jessie’s dad noticed that Lucky sometimes roamed around the field as if she could see—or at least felt more at home in the darkness. On weekends Jessie took oats out to her and buried her hands in Lucky’s thick winter coat. And as spring crept onto the prairie, Lucky’s belly widened with the foal she was carrying.

“I can’t see Lucky anywhere, Mom,” said Jessie from the shed roof early one spring morning.

“She’s just hidden by Blackie,” said her mother, coming out of the house with Jessie’s jacket and books. “Quick. The school bus has turned the corner.” Jessie grabbed her jacket and books and raced for the bus. As it drove along the pasture, she searched for Lucky but couldn’t find her. Jessie was sure of it now: the mare had sought some secret, sheltered spot to have her foal.

School took forever that day. When Jessie returned home on the bus, there was still no buckskin mare in the far pasture. There was no mare in the pasture by the house, either. As she walked up the lane, Jessie saw her dad waiting by the gate. There was something about the way he stood there that she didn’t like. I don’t want to talk to him, she thought. I know what’s happened. The foal is blind, and he’s taken both of them away. Now he’s going to explain why he had to. I hate adults. I hate explanations. It’s not right. It’s not fair.

Jessie bolted past her dad and the house. She scrambled behind the outbuildings and climbed her secret way into the barn loft. She buried herself in the safe half-darkness of hay where only narrow shards of sunlight squeezed through the boards. Hiding. Hiding

“Jessie! Jessie!” Her dad was calling from the barn doorway. How did he know where she was? Why couldn’t he just let her be?

“I wanted to tell you – I went into town and bought Lucky a Seeing Eye dog this morning.”

Another of his jokes, thought Jessie. Another of his corny...

She stopped in midthought. Her dad made corny jokes, but he never made cruel ones. Then she heard a heavy movement and a low nicker in one of the stalls below her. She crawled to an opening and peered down. Below her stood Lucky and the new foal—a beautiful foal, all legs and bones and wobbles. Jessie dropped a handful of hay through the opening. The foal’s head bobbed comically as its eyes caught the movement. It could see!

“I thought Lucky might feel more reassured in the protection of the barn,” her dad said. “I brought her in last night.”

Jessie knew then that her father had been every bit as worried as she. He must have come in from the fields this afternoon just so he could share the good news with her. In her own fear, she’d forgotten how much her dad loved horses of all kinds—even blind horses. He probably loved horses as much as he loved his own corny jokes.

Jessie climbed down into the warmth and life below her. She didn’t know what to say. No, that wasn’t true—she knew exactly what to say. “Seeing Eye dog indeed,” Jessie scoffed. “I suppose we’ll have to name it Rover.”

“Not a bad idea,” said her dad as the foal’s bright eyes fixed on Jessie’s outstretched hand and it arched its neck forward to nuzzle her fingers. “Not a bad idea at all.”