

The Girl and the Donkey



Jane MEADOW

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On a bright Saturday morning, Amelia skipped up the dusty lane to the farm sanctuary. Her yellow rain boots squelched in the mud, and her straw sun hat bounced with each step. She carried a green canvas satchel full of carrots. Amelia loved animals more than anything, and today she would meet every one of them.



Farmer Ruth met her at the gate, her silver hair shining under a wide-brimmed hat. She wore a plaid flannel shirt and green work trousers. 'Welcome, Amelia,' she said with a warm smile. 'The animals here have all been rescued. Some are shy, and some are stubborn.' Amelia nodded, her hazel eyes wide with excitement.



Farmer Ruth led Amelia past the chickens and the goats to a small paddock. There stood a grey donkey with long floppy ears and a dark stripe down his back. His cream muzzle twitched, and his brown leather halter had a little brass tag that read 'Jasper.' He watched Amelia from the far corner, his large dark eyes wary.



Amelia took a step closer, but Jasper flattened his long ears and turned away. 'He won't come near strangers,' Farmer Ruth said gently. 'He was rescued from a place where nobody was kind to him. Trust cannot be rushed, Amelia. You must give him time.' Amelia looked at the shy donkey and promised herself she would be patient.



Every day after school, Amelia returned to the sanctuary. She brought Jasper fresh hay and a bucket of cool water. She didn't try to touch him, just set the food down and sat quietly on an upturned crate. Jasper watched her from a distance, his floppy ears twitching. He didn't come close, but he didn't run away either.



One afternoon, Farmer Ruth showed Amelia how to brush a donkey. 'Use gentle strokes,' she said, handing her a soft brush. 'Never rush him.' Amelia left the brush by the fence, hoping Jasper might come to it. He sniffed the air, took one slow step, then stopped. Amelia smiled and stayed perfectly still.



Days turned into weeks. Amelia learned to fill Jasper's water trough and tidy his stall. She scattered fresh straw for his bed and picked out his hooves with Farmer Ruth's help. Jasper still kept his distance, but his ears no longer flattened when she came near. Sometimes he blinked his long pale lashes at her, as if thinking.



Then one chilly morning, Amelia sat on her crate, humming a soft tune. Jasper took a step toward her, then another. His scruffy forelock flopped over one eye. He stretched his neck and sniffed her yellow boot. Amelia held her breath. He sniffed her hand, his whiskery nose tickling her fingers. Then, ever so gently, he let her stroke his neck.



Amelia's heart swelled with joy. She reached for the soft brush and ran it along Jasper's grey coat. He stood perfectly still, his dark eyes half closed. 'You like that, don't you?' she whispered. Jasper let out a long, contented sigh. Farmer Ruth watched from the gate, her kind grey eyes crinkling with a smile.



From that day on, Jasper followed Amelia everywhere. He trotted behind her as she carried hay, his little hooves clip-clopping on the path. When she sat on the fence, he rested his cream muzzle on her shoulder. He even let her scratch behind his long ears, which made him lean in and close his eyes with a happy snort.



One morning, Amelia arrived to find Jasper waiting at the gate. When he saw her, he threw back his head and let out a loud, joyful bray: 'Hee-haw! Hee-haw!' Amelia laughed and ran to him. 'Good morning, Jasper!' she cried. Farmer Ruth chuckled. 'He's been calling for you all morning. I think he missed you.'



Amelia fed Jasper a carrot from her satchel. He crunched it happily, then nuzzled her pocket for more. 'You've done something special,' Farmer Ruth said. 'You didn't rush him. You gave him space, and you showed him kindness every single day. That's why he trusts you now.' Amelia hugged Jasper's warm, sturdy neck.



That afternoon, a new family visited the sanctuary. A little boy ran toward Jasper, arms outstretched. Jasper shied away, his ears flattening. 'Wait,' Amelia said softly. 'He needs time.' She showed the boy how to sit quietly and let Jasper come to him. After a while, Jasper stepped forward and sniffed the boy's hand, just as he had done with Amelia.



Amelia spent the whole summer at the sanctuary. She and Jasper explored the meadow together, splashing through the stream and resting under the apple tree. Jasper carried her straw hat in his teeth, and Amelia laughed until her sides ached. They were the best of friends, and everyone could see how happy they made each other.



When autumn came, Amelia still visited every day. She brushed Jasper's grey coat until it shone, and he followed her around the farm like a loyal shadow. 'You've learned something important,' Farmer Ruth said one evening. 'Friendship can't be hurried. It grows slowly, like a seed, with patience and kindness.' Amelia nodded, her freckled face glowing.



As the sun set over the farm, Amelia sat beside Jasper in the paddock. He rested his head on her lap, and she stroked his long floppy ears. 'I'll always be patient with you,' she whispered. Jasper let out a soft, happy bray. Amelia smiled, her gap-toothed grin bright. She knew that trust, once earned, was the greatest gift of all.