

RACHEL ANNE  
RIDGE



The Homeless  
Donkey Who  
Taught Me about  
Life, Faith, and  
Second Chances

# Flash

Foreword by  
Priscilla Shirer

Stories that teach spiritual lessons, delight with humor, and make me lean in closer to God's heart are my favorites! And this unlikely treasure of a book does just that. You will fall in love with Flash and the way Rachel Anne processes their story together.

**LYSA TERKEURST**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Best Yes* and president of Proverbs 31 Ministries

When I first heard that Rachel Ridge had written a book about her family's donkey, Flash, I had no idea what to expect. Nothing could have prepared me for such a delightful experience! I loved every page of *Flash*, and Rachel has such a gift for storytelling that you can absolutely picture each scene. This book made me laugh at Flash's antics and cry as I identified with the lessons he has taught her family about the way God loves us and sees us. This book will make you fall in love with our Savior all over again and, more than likely, make you hope you can have your own pet donkey someday.

**MELANIE SHANKLE**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Sparkly Green Earrings* and *The Antelope in the Living Room*

This book is a delight; it's an honest, funny, and encouraging reminder of the creative, loving ways that God pursues us, teaches us, and changes us. Granted, I never expected that I'd have so much in common with a donkey, but Flash has taught me more than I could have imagined. You're going to love this book, and when you finish reading it, you're going to want to follow Flash's lead and run with horses.

**SOPHIE HUDSON**, author of *Home Is Where My People Are* and blogger at BooMama.net

*Flash* is a marvelous, wonderful, funny, touching, and illuminating book. The author makes the good donkey Flash come alive on the pages. I agree with Rachel that God uses all sorts of things—from dogs to donkeys—to teach us more about himself, and all we have to do is pay attention.

**JIM KRAUS**, bestselling author of *The Dog That Talked to God*

Charming, poignant, funny, honest—Rachel Anne’s journey with Flash the donkey is pure reading pleasure as she shares her family’s misadventures with their four-legged friend. She opens her heart to us as well, helping us learn memorable lessons about doing life with more meaning and purpose. Flash is delightfully different. I loved it!

**LIZ CURTIS HIGGS**, bestselling author of *The Girl’s Still Got It*

What a charming, endearing, numinous book—and donkey! From the first chapter, you will immediately fall in love with Rachel Anne Ridge and her beloved Flash. By the last line, your eyes will be opened to seeing the ways God shows up and reveals Himself in the most unexpected—and delightful—ways.

**LISA WHELCHER**, actress and author of *The Facts of Life* and *Friendship for Grown-Ups*

I always stand amazed at God’s infinite creativity. When Rachel and Tom Ridge faced a financial crisis, I would have suggested a financial advisor or career counselor. God chose to send a homeless donkey. Flash used his considerable donkey charm to teach the family lessons about service, faithfulness, purpose, passion, and second chances. You will laugh (often) at the antics of Flash. You will be touched by the authenticity of Rachel’s

writing and the depth of the lessons God revealed through an abandoned donkey with big ears and a bigger heart.

**DAVE BURCHETT**, author of *Stay* and *When Bad Christians Happen to Good People*

A kick-in-the-pants read! *Flash* is memoir plus heartwarming and sometimes stressful animal story, mixed together with spiritual truth, all tempered with humor at just the right spots. Though I live in the suburbs, this made me want to disobey my neighborhood's bylaws and get myself a donkey!

**MARY DEMUTH**, author of *The Wall around Your Heart*

Rachel Ridge has a beautiful ability to take the common things of life (like words) and craft them in such a way that they flow like prose and poetry. Submerging yourself in *Flash* is to become lost in a beautiful gallery of her finest art. With each turn of the page, the master storyteller shares a glimpse of humor, revelation, and hope. We'd all like to have a friend like Flash, faithful and true. I recommend this book to anyone who has ever needed a true-blue friend, a second chance, or a fresh perspective.

**JAN GREENWOOD**, pastor of Gateway Women (Gateway Church) and author of *Women at War*

I believe that since Creation, God has used animals to teach us about ourselves and about our Creator—if we'll pay attention. Rachel pays attention, and so will her readers as they delight in a quirky and lovable donkey, Flash.

**DANDI DALEY MACKALL**, author of *Winnie the Horse Gentler, Backyard Horses*, and the Starlight Animal Rescue series

What in the world could a donkey teach me about life? Lots. Why? Because donkeys are simple creatures who live simple lives. Isn't simplicity exactly what so many people are seeking to find amid their busy and hectic existences? In the pages of this book, you will find—in the life of Rachel Anne Ridge and in the life of her surprise pet donkey—that simplicity is beautiful.

**CRYSTAL HURST**, coauthor of *Kingdom Woman*

Reader, BEWARE! By the end of this book you will be searching for a donkey for your own personal growth! From now on, every time I see one of these marvelous creatures out in the field, I will think of Flash, and I am sure a smile or giggle will follow, for this burro of burden is laden with humor and wisdom. Rachel has dignified a lowly creature to the point that you think it almost necessary to fence in your yard, buy some hay, and wait for the lessons to begin.

**TINA WESSON**, *Survivor: The Australian Outback* (Season Two) winner

I loved this whimsical, vulnerable, and simply profound book! Rachel tells how a broken, lost, and stubborn animal awakened her awareness of God's voice in her life. Her story gives hope to anyone who has ever felt inadequate or unseen. She takes the simple and makes it shine to encourage the reader to look with a fresh perspective at the potential God puts in each of us.

**PAIGE C. GREENE**, director of Adult Events, LifeWay Christian Resources

Bravo to Rachel Ridge for this beautifully written book that so eloquently reminds us that our everyday happenings in life can be great lessons and blessings in disguise from our Maker—even in the form of a donkey! Two things you will want when you turn the last page are a donkey in your yard and Rachel as one of your besties!

**CINDY OWEN**, Given Entertainment Group

Flash



RACHEL ANNE RIDGE

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The Homeless Donkey Who Taught Me  
about Life, Faith, and Second Chances



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# Foreword

Good books are like good friends—difficult to find. Many can look promising at the beginning, only to disappoint somewhere down the line. Even when a book is recommended by a person you trust, you can never be sure you'll experience the same connection, that the two of you will hit it off.

Yet sometimes—often for reasons you can't quite put a finger on—you choose to open it up, and open yourself up to it. And every now and then, you're surprised and thankful at the warmth, the joy, the excitement and pleasure you discover inside.

I've had the privilege of finding both—good books *and* good friends. And I'm giddy with joy to introduce you to a couple of them.

Rachel came into my life over a decade ago with a friendship so pure and lasting and impactful that it has made me a better person. Not in theory but in real, tangible, practical ways. She's taught me how to look for and discover the profound beauty tucked away in simplicity, the lovely details that someone else might miss because they're too busy or too tired or too self-absorbed to care.

These little nuances of life are Rachel's treasures. I've watched her take the mundane and routine, the commonplace and plain, and squeeze drops of surprising goodness and vitality from them until everyone in her sphere is saturated with hope and love. She recreates what others would discard, turning it into something memorable and worth capturing. From her perspective, everything is budding with endless and immense possibility.

So a decade ago when she drove up to an unkempt 1970s farmhouse, she saw only the blossoming potential of a cozy, tender place her family could call home. And she loved it and cared for it until it was.

Years later, when her second daughter met the man of her dreams, Rachel transformed a weed-filled, neglected acre of ground into a lush carpet of greenery arched with luxurious foliage to welcome 250 guests and a walk down the aisle.

And the reception. *Oh, the reception!* A timeworn, misshapen barn became a vintage paradise hung with chandeliers and dainty, twinkling white lights that seemed to dance to the beat of the music, like fluffs of white dandelions, blown loose from their stems and carried away on the evening breeze.

This is Rachel's way. Creating goodness where there seems to be none in sight.

And so when Flash showed up—when he sauntered up her quarter-mile driveway, lost, dazed, frightened, and wondering where his next meal would come from—he'd just moseyed unaware into the wide-open arms of grace. Into the arms of Rachel Ridge. The one who sees beauty everywhere and in everything. Even in a dirty, hungry, unwanted, displaced donkey.

He was home.

Rachel and her husband, Tom, looked for Flash's owner for

a while. I mean, can you blame them? Who needs a donkey around to brush and feed and take care of? But then days folded into weeks, and those weeks disappeared into months, and suddenly years had gone by—and Flash was a permanent fixture. Yard art, as she likes to call him. He morphed from a project into a pet, then into a passion, and finally . . . into a present.

A gift. First to her, and then from her to you. And to me.

And the thing is, Flash *is* a gift. I never thought I'd be the kind of girl who could warm up to a donkey, but Flash stole my heart, as well as the hearts of my three sons, who decided he was their own personal pet from the very first day. His penchant for following close behind them with his soft muzzle nudging the backs of their shoulders, begging to be rubbed and caressed, is the highlight of their time with him. Flash keeps his head so close to theirs that they basically bump. They love it. They love him. When my boys show up at the gate and call his name, he comes trotting up enthusiastically. He's been looking for them, waiting for them. And they've been waiting for him.

Turns out we all were and just didn't know it.

Because with Flash, the life lessons weren't long in coming. Rachel would tell me about how he was always able to escape through the one solitary hole in his mile-long fence. Or about the friends he'd made with critters in the next pasture and his sometimes obstinate refusal to move one inch, no matter how hard anyone tugged on his halter. Or his relationship with Beau, the family's beautiful yellow Lab, and how they finally made nice after a long-standing feud.

With each new adventure has come a new lesson, a new gem to enhance all of our lives. Images and insights that could easily go unnoticed by someone less observant and interested. But

Rachel sees all the splendor hidden in these regular simplicities of life. She captures details and digs for beauty, paying attention and causing others to do the same.

Which, by the way, is also the essence of good writing.

And that's exactly what you are holding in your hands. Rachel's good, good writing.

We're so grateful to Tom and Rachel for turning an interruption into an opportunity, for giving a stray donkey a new home and a new name, for letting Flash into their lives. Because in doing so, they let him into ours.

And now, Rachel's letting him into yours.

Every lesson you'll find tucked into these pages will make you laugh, just as much as it will make you learn. And when you turn the final page, you'll be surprised to discover you've found two things in one: a good book about a donkey named Flash, and a good friend in a simple country gal named Rachel.

And you'll never look at either of them quite the same again.

*Flash's fan,  
Priscilla Shirer*

# Prologue

The idea had seemed so solid. Or at the very least, romantic. My husband, Tom, and I launched an art and mural business in the Dallas–Fort Worth area during the booming early 2000s. . . . What could possibly go wrong? Gated communities filled with European-styled mansions were springing up everywhere as the good economic times rolled in. An insatiable demand for the best of everything in amenities and decor kept us booked for months at a time creating interior masterpieces for discriminating clients.

Not bad for a company that had started as my little hobby, painting up birdhouses and selling them in local shops. “Dream Big” was my highly original, personal motto. And it had been my dream to make enough money to get my hair highlighted regularly without dipping into the family grocery budget. *Good grief, those highlights are expensive.* That was about as lofty as my early goals had been. I stayed home with three children, desperately needing this creative outlet, while Tom worked long hours in the electronics manufacturing field.

When the phone began to ring with requests for bigger and grander painting projects, suddenly my hobby became more than I could handle. I needed help to pull it off, and my husband was just the person to bring in. Tom loved creating art with me on nights and weekends, lending his talents and muscle power, since by now scaffolds and lifting heavy supplies were involved. As a creative spirit stuck in a precisely controlled industry, he secretly longed for a way to leave the corporate treadmill and do something with his artistic talents. And when Tom's job evaporated in an industry downturn, it appeared to be the perfect time to launch our dream together.

It *had* to be divine providence, right?

So it was, indeed, a good moment to start a venture we had no prior training in. We would wing it.

We wanted to create beautiful things and paint stuff and make people happy. It was a simple dream. And it worked, mostly. Yes, the cyclical nature of the housing market challenged us more than we anticipated. We knew that “feast and famine” seasons were prerequisites for entrepreneurial triumph. But doing what we loved made each day an adventure, and we were thrilled to wake up and know we were going to make art that people enjoyed. We had our three kids and our dog and our dream, and we said, “It is enough.”

For several years, our life was exactly that. Enough. We reveled in the experience.

Now, cue the foreboding music and enter the burst of the housing bubble. The reveling turned into reeling.

It's an odd thing when success turns to failure. Life looks a whole lot different when your mind is constantly concerned



with questions like how will you pay your bills, how will you afford orthodontia for the kids, and how will you make rice and beans remotely appealing until the next paycheck arrives. *And, really, would living in a tent be so bad?* You forget to notice the sky and the clouds and the way the sunlight sparkles on your daughter's red hair, and you start noticing that every other car is a shiny new BMW and how crowded the fancy restaurants are. At first, you cannot believe your friends are taking carefree family vacations to Cancun, but there's the proof—pictures of them on Facebook, enjoying their prosperity. You forget to walk the dog, although it would do you a world of good to get some exercise, and you eat fast food because it's easy and because slicing up healthy vegetables seems so complicated. You eliminate frivolity and spontaneity, not because you don't have time for them but because those are luxuries rich people enjoy, and you know that "getting away for a weekend" might mean you can't afford supplies for your next project.

Mostly, you wonder why God has let you down, when all you wanted to do was that thing you thought you were created to do. You feel cracks forming in places within your soul that once seemed unshakable. You raise your questions to the sky, but your prayers plummet, seemingly unanswered and ignored.

You feel very alone.

Failure wears like a wet wool coat on a summer day, crushing your frilly party dress of optimism underneath its weight. Survival and existence and going through the motions feel like the best you can do, and sometimes that's all you *can* do. You go to work, you put food on the table, you help with homework, you smile and cheer at your kid's hockey game, you reach for a

hand under the blankets at night, and you grasp at every sweet moment you can. But beneath the busyness and activity, you know that something must change—or you will not survive.

This is exactly where I found myself the night the donkey showed up.



CHAPTER 1

An Unexpected Guest



Tom hit the brakes and brought our ten-year-old Explorer to an abrupt stop on the gravel. The dust from the tires blew past us and swirled around the animal in our headlights, much like smoke in a stage show.

It was a donkey. In the middle of our driveway.

“What in the world?” my husband muttered as we peered through the windshield at the creature with gigantic ears, caught midchew and looking every bit as surprised as we did. Just twenty feet in front of our bumper, he blinked hard into the bright beams, grass protruding from both sides of his mouth and those unmistakable ears pricked forward. We stared at him as he swallowed his mouthful and stared back at us. Then the ears swiveled around, and he did an about-face, heading for the shadows.

I turned to Tom, my nylon jacket rustling against the seat belt.

“Hey, that’s a . . . that’s a . . .”

“Donkey,” he finished for me. I squeezed my eyes shut, then opened them quickly, just to be sure. Yep, still there. Still a donkey. “What on earth is a donkey doing here?”

Tom leaned forward and squinted through the darkness at the lumpy shape, which now feasted on a clump of early spring grass beyond the headlights. Tom rubbed his chin, assessing the situation. He put the vehicle in “Park” and reached a conclusion before I could say anything else.

“Somebody is going to run into that guy if we don’t catch him,” he said, almost too tired to get the words out. The narrow, meandering lanes through the Texas countryside, a shadowy March night, speeding locals, and a donkey on the loose . . . it was an accident waiting to happen. And neither an accident nor a donkey roundup was on the list of things we wanted to deal with at the end of a long, hard day.

“Just let him be,” I reasoned. “I’m sure someone is out looking for him, and they’ll find him and take him home.” I watched as the stray donkey plunged his head into another clump, tore off the grass, and munched away. A neighbor’s floodlight now illuminated him, and I could see he was scratched up pretty badly. Maybe he’d already been in an accident. He probably did need our help, but still . . . all I could think about was taking a warm shower and crawling into my pajamas. It was well past 9:00 p.m., and we hadn’t seen our kids since breakfast. We were exhausted and ready to put this awful day behind us.

I thought back to that morning. It began with the discovery of our client’s girdle and brassiere, heaped in a pile on her bathroom floor. Yes, let’s start there. The sturdy shapewear was an awkward obstacle right in the middle of the room, hampering our “glamorous” handiwork as we decorated the cramped space with an Italian countryside scene and became intimate friends with the toilet in the process of working around it. Tom finally used a paint stick to scoop up the undergarments, holding them at arm’s length and looking away out of gentlemanly respect as he placed them on the tub ledge so he could continue the commode masterpiece. *Good grief, it’s hot in here. Why is the thermostat set so high? And why does underwear need so much structure?*

The day ended under the ceiling dome of the home’s foyer,

balancing on extension ladders and sweating profusely while we plied our brushes, adding “just a few more details” requested by the client at the last minute to a painting we’d already finished—well beyond the scope of our agreement. Somewhere in between these two events came the horrifying realization that this mural project would not pay the rent.

We were living our dream. Only it had become a nightmare.

Tom and I barely spoke to one another as we loaded up our ladders and artist supplies to head home. Our kids, the two who remained under our roof, had eaten cereal for dinner without us and were hopefully doing something constructive without supervision. I had some reassurance that homework was underway after making several calls from my precarious perch in the foyer, carefully inching the cell phone from my right pocket to my left ear without disturbing my balance. Like every working parent, I wouldn’t know for sure until I got home and saw proof.

Grayson, our twelve-year-old son, could be easily distracted by an elaborate Lego project or model airplane, two of his current passions besides ice hockey. Meghan, a senior in high school, might have spent the whole evening on the phone, or writing music for her band, or picking out tomorrow’s outfit. Our oldest daughter, Lauren, was in the middle of her first year at a nearby university, studying graphic design and planning a wedding with her high school sweetheart. Between the kids’ activities and our workload, life spun like a wobbly top most days. I couldn’t help the sigh that escaped my lips.

I pressed my forehead against the cold passenger window in the Explorer and let fatigue wash over me. This wasn’t exactly how I’d envisioned our following-the-dream adventure playing

out. We had come to the part they don't tell you about in the motivational books and seminars—the part about how in the midst of living out your passion and going for all the marbles, you still need to eat and pay the rent. Life has a way of kicking your dream in the pants. Add to the equation orthodontia for the kids and coming up with college tuition, and you've got something called a painful reality check.

Driving the potholed roads, Tom and I had retreated into our separate worlds of silent defeat and mutual blame. We both needed warm showers and a good night's sleep so we could face our situation with some objectivity in the morning. But as we turned the Ford onto our dirt-and-gravel driveway for the final, dusty quarter mile to our home, there, illuminated by the headlights, was the donkey.

We watched him a few minutes more; then Tom turned off the engine and opened the door. "This won't take long, Rachel," he said over his shoulder. "Stay right there and keep an eye on him, and I'll be right back with a rope to catch him. We'll put him in our pasture tonight and find his owners tomorrow. I don't want to be responsible for anyone getting hurt by running into him with a car."

Obediently, I sat and watched the donkey continue his voracious feast on the roadside grass. *What a pointless animal*, I thought, *but, kind of cute*. As promised, Tom quickly returned with a nylon rope—and a bucket. The donkey, though suspicious of this human stranger, immediately became interested in the contents of the container that Tom shook ever so alluringly, and he stepped closer to inspect it. Oats!

It was then we made the overconfident assumption that "this is gonna be easy."

A classic rookie mistake.

Hey, getting a stray donkey interested in oats is simple. Getting him roped and convincing him to follow is . . . not so much. Tom, a tough outdoorsman with a soft spot for anything in need, seemed to be up for the task in spite of the long day of work he'd had. Cautiously, he closed in on the nervous donkey and gently looped the rope over his gigantic head and around his neck. In a calm voice, Tom urged him to cooperate and flashed a premature thumbs-up at the first tentative steps. See, it *was* going to be easy after all!

"Yay!" I mimed, with a dramatic happy face and my own thumbs-up in reply. I believed the dim moonlight called for some overacting to properly convey my encouragement. Suddenly, the small hooves stopped and dug in. The little guy leaned back and refused to take another step.

Tom coaxed and gave a gentle tug on the rope. The donkey balked.

Tom gave him nibbles of oats. He took two steps forward . . . *yes!* Then five steps to the side . . . *no!* Tom pulled. The donkey pulled harder in the opposite direction. Clearly, this was not working as we had hoped.

Tom called me from the sidelines into active duty. He gave me the rope and went behind the donkey. With a deep breath, Tom pushed. I pulled.

Nothing.

Tom put his shoulder into the animal's rump, braced his feet, and pushed with his legs, while I pulled even harder.

Not an inch. We dropped our hands to our sides and began to strategize.



Tom had a brilliant idea. “Let’s switch places,” he suggested, but I was not so sure.

“He’d better not have gas!” I moved to the rear and planted my tennis shoes as far away as possible to stay clear of any kicks and possible flatulence, while Tom took hold of the rope at the donkey’s head. Still no progress. The animal would not budge. He simply looked at us through heavy-lidded eyes as if to say, “Go ahead, keep trying. This is entertaining.” He chewed on the oats like he had all the time in the world.

To our exasperation, all the coaxing, leading, pulling, enticing, and demanding resulted in the donkey only getting farther from our pasture gate than where we had started.

By now, the wind had picked up, and the branches on the trees swayed in an eerie dance that spooked the long-eared intruder. He bolted into a nearby yard, pulling Tom into a run alongside him, my poor husband hanging on to the rope for dear life. A bathrobe-clad neighbor came out to see the ruckus, and she and I stood with our backs to the wind as the cat-and-mouse game continued its spectacle. Three steps forward, two steps back. One step forward, three steps to the side. Cajoling, pushing, pleading, chasing. Mercy, it was hard not to laugh. But when I saw Tom rip the baseball cap off his head and throw it in frustration, I stifled my snicker. His small act of kindness had become a sheer battle of the wills. This. Was. War. Respectfully, I got back into the parked Explorer, pulled a granola bar from my purse, and settled in for the rest of the show.

I watched as they slowly made their way down the blacktop road and back toward our long driveway. A yard lamp backlit their bodies into black silhouettes, and it was then that I laughed out loud. There was Tom’s dark shape, straining hard

on the rope until his body practically paralleled the ground. And there stretched the donkey's dark shape, front legs locked, neck drawn forward, and back end sitting down in defiance. It looked just like an old velvet painting I'd once seen of a silhouetted boy and stubborn donkey in the same pose. How I wished I had bought that classic painting for this very moment in time.

Finally Tom found a rhythm the donkey could cooperate with, and the two moved down the driveway, which went across a pond's dam and through a tunnel of swaying trees. With one arm around his opponent's neck while talking quietly into one of those big ears, Tom leaned into the animal and knocked one knee out from under him. As the donkey tried to catch his balance, Tom took advantage of the forward movement and pulled him an extra couple of steps. By fits and starts, the duo arrived at the pasture, and Tom closed the gate on the skinny-rumped creature—three hours later.

"Done!" he said. "I can't wait to get rid of him tomorrow. That was one of the worst experiences of my life! We'll call the county sheriff first thing in the morning."

^ ^

By the light of day, Tom and I, along with Meghan and Grayson, gathered in the pasture to take a good look at our unwilling guest.

He was a mess.

Mud and scabs caked his shaggy winter hair into an ugly, matted coat. Fresh gashes from barbed wire fences seemed to be everywhere, from head to hoof, oozing and bleeding. The scratches crisscrossed his face and legs, with a four-inch slice that went deep into the flesh of his barrel chest. The wounds needed immediate attention, so we cleaned and dressed them

with ointment as the donkey trembled inside our three-sided barn. Although it seemed as if he knew our efforts were meant to help him, he allowed only brief touches before skittishly moving just beyond our reach. His lips quivered, and his tail swished nervously. We moved in slow motion, using hushed voices as we worked.

“It’s okay, donkey. You’re okay,” we reassured him. What else had he experienced before his sudden arrival here? We wondered aloud about his past.

Under the mud, he was a light brownish-gray color, with a white muzzle that looked as if it had been dipped in a deep bucket of buttermilk. A matching creamy-white color circled his big brown eyes and covered the underside of his belly with soft hair. With faint stripes adorning sturdy legs, he stood no taller than four feet at the shoulder. *How can an animal this compact be so difficult to manage?* The daylight made him seem so . . . well, compliant.

A wispy mane trickled down a broad neck, and his tail, unlike a horse’s, was a strong shaft of muscle and bone with long strands of coarse hair starting partway down. A long, dark stripe down the center of his back began at his mane and disappeared into his tail. Up close, his ears were even bigger than I’d remembered from the night before. Thick and mobile, they were never pointing the same direction for very long. The caramel-colored fuzz that covered them was outlined by dark hair around the edges and tufted with cream on the insides. His straight black eyelashes made his eyes seem a little sad, or maybe it was just the way his large head drooped that gave him such a melancholy air.

“Oh look!” Grayson pointed out in delight from his perch on the fence. “He has a cross on his back!” A chocolate-brown

pattern of hair emblazoned across his shoulders distinctly intersected the dark stripe down his back. Legend has it that every donkey bears the symbol of Christ, in honor of His triumphant entry into Jerusalem before His crucifixion. Seeing a donkey face-to-face for the first time certainly brought the biblical story to mind. Our eyes lingered on this marking and then wandered to his many wounds. He was, as we say in Texas, “tore up.”

Tom put his arm across Grayson’s shoulders as we made our way through the tall grass back to the house, while Meghan stayed to keep the donkey company. A creature lover since she was a toddler, Meghan once claimed the ability to talk to animals. Although this one was much larger than the hamsters and parakeets she’d communicated with before, he still looked as if he needed a friend.

She sat on a wooden step in the barn near the shy donkey, chin in hand, and listened to the birds sing in the rafters as she watched him. With wary eyes on her, the donkey kept his distance but lingered in the barn, rather than making for the pasture beyond. After some minutes had ticked by, he took one hesitant step toward the slim, redheaded girl, then paused as if thinking.

Then another step. A little closer.

A fly buzzed.

“It’s okay, buddy,” Meghan murmured. She turned a palm up in silent beckoning.

And another step.

A long minute. Ears twitching. Blowing hard. The chirping birds oblivious to the slow dance below.

“I won’t hurt you.”

Closer.

“You’re safe now.”

A little closer still . . . until his tentative nostrils touched her knees.

“It’s all right.”

He sniffed her scent and paused again. His long ears turned forward. Tail swished the fly. Finally, he closed his eyes and took one last step, resting his giant head in her lap with a deep donkey sigh. Meghan’s hand came up and gently stroked his face and ears. She scratched his neck and whispered softly to him. His lower lip sagged sleepily as he relaxed for the first time since his arrival. The donkey and girl stayed just so for a long while, his head heavy on her legs as she caressed him and gently untangled his scraggly mane.

I was in the kitchen when Meghan came bursting through the door. “Oh Momma! He’s *sweet!*” she exclaimed as she described the quiet moments in the barn. She finished with a breathless, “Can we keep him, please??”

Drying my hands on a towel, I looked at her pleading expression. I should have known this was coming. *Here we go. Don’t you start begging for a donkey.* Sweet or not, we knew he had to belong to someone. Surely. I mean, how can a person misplace a donkey, for heaven’s sake? His owners *must* be looking for him.

“Meggie, you can’t let yourself get attached to him. You know he’s not going to be here long.” I smoothed the disappointment from her forehead and continued. “He’s going to be on his way just as soon as we find out where he belongs, and I don’t want you to get your heart broken when he leaves.”

“But what if nobody claims him?” she appealed. “Then can we keep him?”

“Honey, I don’t think we are ‘donkey people.’ We don’t know

the first thing about them. We certainly don't have any use for one. And besides, I think you're getting ahead of yourself. We need to do what we can to find his home before we start making any plans." But in my mind, I'd already been wondering the same thing.

Just then, we heard noise from outside, near the pasture gate. We hurried to see what the fuss was about and found our yellow Lab, Beau, wagging his entire body as he barked and whined in excitement. A new friend! He could hardly contain his joy. The donkey, who had left the barn and ventured toward the house, looked up in surprise.

"Beau is anxious to say hello," Grayson said as he came from around the corner and attempted to grab Beau's collar to calm him. But the one-hundred-pound dog had already squeezed his slobbery self under the gate and loped across the open space to where the donkey stood, frozen in alarm. Beau's hefty tail worked from side to side as he approached the donkey with shameless curiosity and wiggly welcome.

For a split second the donkey held still, taking him in. Then, like a bolt of lightning, he whirled around and struck out with his back left hoof. Yelping in shock, Beau came to an abrupt skid on his haunches. The donkey turned and lowered his head, breathing heavily, while Beau backed up and let out a whimper. The two locked eyes as they circled one another. Donkey: ears flat, head low, nostrils flared. Dog: ears forward, hair raised, nose twitching. The hoof had missed Beau's chest, but the message it delivered was clear: Stay away. Rebuffed, the dog finally returned to the gate, looking over his shoulder with his tail tucked and eyes filled with confusion. Poor Beau. He'd never been rejected so soundly in his whole life!

“Beau needs to learn to slow down a little,” I said as we huddled over the dog to comfort him. I looked back to see the donkey, still breathing hard and agitated. “He scared the poor guy half to death with all that energy!” Too much, too soon.

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That week, we went into action. We posted signs, contacted authorities, and checked with local feed stores. We looked for the donkey’s owner high and low. But no one seemed to be missing a donkey. It was like he appeared out of thin air. Onto our property. Like a rabbit out of a hat.

When the county sheriff stopped by our house, we learned that our situation was far from unique: People simply abandoned their donkeys along country roads when they tired of caring for them, given that the animals have life spans of thirty or forty years. Droughts always bring high numbers of strays, and we were in the middle of a bad one. Many people can’t afford to keep these cute-but-grass-consuming animals who compete for grazing land with cattle, so they dump them off. Without so much as a second thought.

“Yep, novelty wears off real quick,” the sheriff said in his Texas drawl. “Ya see a lotta sad cases out here.” He adjusted his wide-brimmed hat and looked at the donkey. “Now, this fella here is young. He’s not even a mature male, if you know what I mean.” He cleared his throat as we digested the meaning of “mature male” and glanced underneath his thin belly to see what the sheriff was talking about. Aah, yes.

The lawman’s thick mustache twitched as he continued. “It’s pretty typical to see males let loose like this. You don’t see the females as often because they’re better at keeping coyotes away

from cattle and goats, but these jacks . . . well, I can't even get five dollars for 'em at auction. Nobody wants 'em. Basically, they're worthless animals."

"But what happens to them if no one takes them from your auction?" I asked, not wanting to know the answer.

He paused for a moment. "We try to find a rescue organization that will take 'em. There are some reputable ones around, and they do a good job taking these guys off our hands. Problem is, right now, they're filled up over their capacity, and it's tough to place these new strays. Ya hate to think what could happen, but the reality is the state can't afford to keep feeding 'em indefinitely."

The donkey's ears twitched toward us, as if eavesdropping on the discussion of his fate.

Horried that he might have overheard, I looked at Tom for support and suggested, "How about if we just keep him here until his owners contact your office?" Tom nodded in agreement, and the sheriff beamed.

"Sounds good. Real good. Now, I've got three other jacks in my custody . . ." He trailed off, bushy eyebrows raised in an unspoken question.

Tom hurriedly thanked him for his time and said we'd look forward to his call. We parted ways before this whole rescue thing got even more out of hand.

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The weeks stretched on, and Lauren, our oldest redhead, came home from college to finish planning her wedding to Robert. It was just a couple of months away, and we had some work to do in order to pull it off. With the five of us all together, we felt like a complete circle once again, a little family staying afloat



on a swift river of painting projects and dress fittings. Somehow we limped through the financial disaster that had loomed the night the donkey showed up, and we were managing to barter, trade, and “do it yourself” through the wedding details. Our problems were far from solved, but we did our best to pretend they didn’t exist. At least for now.

A warm stillness hung in the air as we gathered at the fence to look at this wounded, and apparently worthless, stray who had given rescue such a fight. His sores had not yet healed, but he looked remarkably good in spite of the two permanent scars across his nose. Already his thin stomach was filling out, and his patchy hair, without all the burrs and scabs, felt soft under our touch.

There had been no response whatsoever to our search for his owner, and we knew a decision needed to be made. We could turn him over to the county and some unknown future, or we could provide a home for him, at least for now. Obviously, the three kids and I would launch an all-out campaign to keep him.

“Look at him out there. He *is* pretty sweet,” we pointed out. He nibbled daintily on the green blades of grass and swatted flies with that funny tail of his. He seemed . . . perfectly innocuous. Charming, even.

Tom was having none of this “permanence” thing, and it seemed he had Beau on his side. “I’ve seen the dark side of him,” he rebutted, remembering that first night. “He’s impossible to handle, and he’s stubborn and obviously not very bright. And Beau hates him—don’t you, Beau?” At that, the donkey looked up and gave a snort. He shook his long ears so they flapped together in a kind of ear-clap as if he were replying, “Hey, now! I heard that.”

Beau barked in return. He didn't exactly *hate* the donkey after their first encounter. However, the donkey seemed to hate *him*. They weren't any closer to friendship, and in fact, they appeared to be in an animal standoff. But I had faith. After all, *no one* can hate a good yellow Lab. And who could resist such an adorable donkey? I was sure they just needed time to bond. Perhaps Beau could learn to be less extroverted, giving the donkey a chance to see beyond the teeth and tail to the warm heart that was just a *bit* overeager. Their relationship would take some work.

The kids picked up the lobbying. "Dad, we Googled 'donkey care' and found out that donkeys are pretty low maintenance. They don't need expensive food, they don't require extra special care, and all they really need is shelter in bad weather. Which we already have." They pointed to the barn, unused except for storage.

"Yeah, well, I'm pretty sure it's not as simple as that. It never is. I think a little more research is in order, guys. We just don't need another mouth to feed," Tom volleyed, mindful of our precarious bank balance. "Think of the vet bills and hay. I mean, look at him out there. He's a pig. He's going to require a lot of food at the rate he's going." Then he pulled out the reasoning every parent gives to every child at some point in their lives: "You kids can't remember to feed the dog, much less a donkey, so don't expect *me* to take care of him for you. We're not keeping him, period."

Tom did have a point about not remembering to feed the dog; they couldn't argue that. But of course they insisted that this would be completely different. Despite his tough talk, I'd seen Tom out there trying to befriend the scruffy donkey when he thought no one was looking. Day after day, he sat on a camp

chair in the middle of the pasture for long periods of time. He brought a book to read, or watched the birds, or looked at some imaginary point in the distance, in hopes that the donkey would simply become comfortable in his presence. It was as if Tom instinctively knew (unlike Beau) to leave the pace of trust up to the donkey.

At first, the donkey had given the man in the chair a wide berth, grazing in a perimeter far beyond his reach. He shied back from any sudden movement of Tom's arms. Every now and then he'd look over at Tom, all the while chewing, taking him in, assessing.

Had the donkey been mistreated at the hands of a man in previous encounters? If only he could tell us. I could see that the donkey's resistance to our rescue had been rooted in some kind of fear, and it broke my heart to think that someone could hurt such a sweet animal.

Gradually, the donkey's self-designated perimeter around Tom's chair grew smaller. He inched nearer. And one afternoon, as Tom read his book, he heard the grass rustle behind him. He felt a nose on his shoulder. A sniff on his neck. Lips gently nibbling his collar.

"Hey, Donkey Boy." Tom's voice was soft, calm. "That's a good boy. That's a good boy."

He slowly lifted his hand and cupped the donkey's head. The wall began to crumble.

Brave enough now to come near for a carrot and gentle petting, he still seemed so vulnerable. And was it me, or did his soft brown eyes seem slightly hopeful? Perhaps I was projecting.

"What do the neighbors think about his braying?" Lauren asked, breaking a twig off the tree by the fence. "I actually heard

him from way down the road the other day! Sounded like someone was being killed over here.”

Right on cue, the donkey lifted his head and began heaving his sides. His lips pulled back to reveal a big set of teeth as a foghorn-like sound exploded from his mouth. *HEE-haw, HEE-haw, HEE-haw, haw, haw*. I suppose it could be disturbing if you weren't used to it, but in truth, I loved hearing his bray because it reminded me of growing up in Mexico as a missionary kid. We'd lived there off and on during my growing-up years. Burros were everywhere, carrying loads of sticks, pulling carts, and posing in their colorful, fringed halters with tourists. I thought they were such beautiful creatures, and I'd try to imitate their brays as we drove past, sticking my head out the car window and letting out a *HEE-haw!* in what I thought was a friendly overture. Not one of them ever seemed remotely impressed, but that didn't keep me from trying.

As the donkey's bray subsided, we considered the pros and cons of keeping him.

“We probably wouldn't ride him, like we would a real horse, would we?” asked Grayson.

“I guess you *could*, but it seems like it would be a really slow ride,” Tom replied. “Plus, we'd have to train him, and we don't know anything about that.”

True, true. Nods all around.

“What if we put him to work around here?” Meghan offered. “We could plant a big garden, and he could pull a plow.”

We thought about that for a minute.

“Nah. That would never happen.”

“Too bad we don't have a mine,” I laughed. “He could haul wagonloads of gold, and we could all be rich.”

Our chuckles subsided, and I could see that Tom was just one good reason away from letting him stay. Think, family, think.

“Well, he’s fun to look at,” said Grayson, glancing up at his dad.

“Yes! Yes, he is!” we chimed in. “Very fun to look at! And nice to talk about!”

“You mean he’s a conversation piece?” Tom’s voice had softened with his smile at the thought.

“Yeah, like what if we had some weird relatives from the city over, and we didn’t have anything to talk about? We could always just bring them out here to see the donkey, and they’d probably love it.” Grayson was making a solid case here. Just needed one final push . . .

“I bet we could get ten minutes of conversation out of it,” Lauren said in support. “Possibly fifteen. People would find him really interesting.” Four pairs of eyes turned toward Tom with laser-like focus.

“Ah, excellent point. I guess you could say he makes good yard art,” Tom conceded as he opened the gate and stepped close to the donkey. Still moving slowly around him, Tom reached forward to rub the insides of his ears. I felt in my pocket for the carrot slice that I’d brought from the kitchen.

“Listen, you guys.” He took a breath. “We can keep him if . . .”

The cheers from the group nearly drowned the provisional addendum he was about to tack on.

“Ahem!” Tom regained our attention by quashing our congratulatory noise with his hand motions. “As I was saying, we can keep him . . . *if* he is indeed as low maintenance as you say he will be, *if* he does not eat too much, and *if* he is an upstanding citizen around here.”

Simple! Piece of cake! We’ve got this! We went back to

cheering, and naturally, our exuberance spooked the donkey in question. With a toss of his head, and hind legs bucking, he spun around and trotted for the far corner of the pasture, but not before snatching the carrot from my hand in a greedy chomp.

Beau barked his opposition to the arrangement, possibly the last voice of reason.

Something told me this was not going to be as simple as I thought.