

↳ Melanie Sue Bowles



Liberty

Does a family mystery stand in the way of saving Kip's best friend?

↳ Biscuit

*chapter 2*

*T*hat apparition turned out to be this raggedy little donkey who insisted on keeping some part of his body touching mine. It was as though he thought I might disappear if we were separated and he wasn't going to risk it.

As odd as it may sound, I'd already developed quite an affection for him. Our time together amounted to under two hours, but I felt we were tethered to each other by more than the braided wisteria vine. He seemed to need me, and I'll admit, I liked the way being needed felt.

The donkey and I stood at the edge of the woods, staring at the house, while a flutter of butterflies knocked around in my stomach. I'd spent the long walk

home trying to think of a way to sell Daddy on the idea of finally letting me have a pet.

I suppose someone smarter than me would've taken another stab at this old argument with, say, a hamster or a lizard. Not me. I had the audacity to launch my attack with a three-hundred-pound donkey who looked like he'd been through the wringer. Go big or go home.

There wasn't any movement from behind the wide row of windows in our kitchen. I wondered if Mama was in her office. Grandpa Joe must've finished working in the garden and gone inside. I shifted my eyes up the gravel drive toward the equipment barn. The bay doors were closed. That meant Daddy had finished working and was probably in the house getting cleaned up for company and our cookout.

I draped my arm over the donkey's back. "I don't know how it happened, in so short a time, but I sure do love you." I spoke the words quietly. "And I sure do wanna keep you." The donkey shuffled forward and pressed his cheek against my hip. "Now, listen to me...we're gonna face some fierce opposition." I leaned down to look into his good eye. "You hear me? But if you behave yourself and act like a gentleman, we just might have a shot at this. In other words, just stand there, quiet-like."

Truth be told, I doubted we actually did "have a shot," but the moment called for a positive outlook. The donkey looked

back at me and blinked his one eye several times. “Daddy’s not a bad sort,” I continued. “In fact, in all ways I’d say he’s the best daddy in the world. He’s A+ across the board. Except when it comes to keeping pets. And anything to do with horses. Then he gets a D-.”

The donkey gave me a nudge.

“I know. You’re not a horse. But you’re in the equine family and Daddy will regard you as a nuisance, just the same.”

Looking back at the house, I took a very deep breath and held it as long as I could. As I let it out, I whispered, “It’s now or never...”



“What in the world!” Mama’s face suddenly appeared in the kitchen window.

I smiled and wiggle-waggled my fingers in a casual wave as though a donkey attached to my hip were an everyday occurrence.

“Oh, Kip,” she said through the open window. Except the words came out more like a groan. Her brow was furrowed. “Where did you find a donkey?”

Before I could answer, Mama turned and walked briskly toward the back door. “The poor thing looks like he’s starving,”

she said when she joined us in the backyard.

“He is starving, Mama.” My tone of voice was urgent. “I found him in the woods.” I looked at her with pleading eyes and added, “He needs me.”

Mama reached out to run a hand down the donkey’s neck. He turned to smell her arm. Then he licked her. Mama and I both couldn’t help but chuckle. He must have realized she was the source of those peach biscuits.

“Isn’t he the sweetest thing, Mama? I just love him. Couldn’t we keep him?”

“Oh, Kip. If it was just up to me...but I don’t know what Daddy will say.”

Mama hadn’t seemed to agree with Daddy’s no-pet policy over the years, but it was also a topic she backed away from. She never tried to change his mind. I always wondered why.

“Daddy says he’ll be calling the sheriff to come get some stray livestock off his property.”

Mama and I quickly turned to see Daddy standing on the porch. His hands were stuck on his hips and his eyes were fixed in an unpleasant stare. I found it curious that he was speaking in the third person. I considered doing the same. *Kip found this donkey in the woods and she’d like to keep him. She thinks he’s precious.* But then I quickly decided it wouldn’t be the wisest way to win Daddy’s heart.

“Daddy,” I began. Mama put her hand on my arm, quieting me.

“Charles, just wait a minute,” she said.

“Wait for what, Elise?” Daddy dropped his hands to his sides and came down the steps.

“Daddy, please,” I said. Mama gripped my arm and gave me a gentle shake, once again silently asking me to be quiet.

“*Wait*, Charles, to make a decision until we’ve discussed this like a family,” Mama said crossing her own arms over her chest in a show of conviction. I was surprised, but proud she was standing up for me.

“Discussed this!” Daddy said as his eyebrows shot nearly up into his hairline. “There’s nothing to discuss. This animal either belongs to someone or he’s been abandoned. Either way, he’s not staying here.”

I had hoped my positive outlook would create a favorable outcome. I knew Daddy wouldn’t be pleased, but I thought there might be a blink of consideration. A blip. I would have taken a blip.

“Well, if he belongs to someone,” Mama said, “they haven’t taken very good care of him.”

“He may have been missing for weeks,” Daddy coldly reasoned. “Or longer, by the looks of him.”

“I agree we should call the sheriff to see if someone has reported him missing. But if he is homeless, or he comes from

a home where he was neglected, I think we should talk about allowing Katherine to keep him.” Now Mama stuck her hands on her hips.

“I would like to keep him, Daddy,” I said.

Daddy was already shaking his head. “You know how I feel about pets.”

“Look how good he is,” I said, trying not to sound like I was whining. “He won’t be any trouble, Daddy.”

“The expense,” Daddy said.

“He can graze the orchards,” said Mama. “We have hundreds of acres of free food.”

“He needs to be seen by a vet. He looks half-dead and wormy. And he needs his hooves trimmed. All of that costs money.”

“I’ll bet Grandpa Joe will know what to do,” I said. “We don’t need a vet. Grandpa Joe knows everything about horses. And he can teach me to trim his hooves.”

“Donkeys are nothing but trouble. Mischief. And what about the mess? The manure?”

“I’ll watch over him, and I’ll clean up after him. I promise.”

Suddenly, as though he’d just been standing around waiting for the perfect opportunity, the donkey lifted his tail and made an awful grunting sound. Then manure plopped to the ground near Daddy’s feet. I bit my lip and turned my face away

to hide my smile. Mama put her hand over her mouth while her shoulders shook with muffled laughter.

Then Mama exclaimed, “Fertilizer! For the garden.” There was a touch of awe in her voice as though the donkey had performed a magic trick. And then she reached for Daddy’s hand. “He really is very sweet, Charles.”

Just then, the donkey swung around, pointed his backside directly at Daddy, and lifted one hoof in an agitated way.

“Sweet?” Daddy said, backing away.

I tugged on the makeshift lead rope to move the donkey forward so he had to put his foot down. “You’re not making this any easier,” I growled in his good ear.

“He can sense you don’t like him,” Mama told Daddy.

“And he’d be right,” Daddy said. “If he doesn’t have a home, Sheriff Ronnie can take him to auction.”

I gasped. “Daddy, no! The auction is a horrible place. All the animals are so scared.” I wrapped my arms around the donkey’s head. He shut his eyes and leaned against me. “He’d just end up going to slaughter. Please, Daddy.”

One day last summer, Grandpa Joe and I had stopped at the livestock auction. He wanted to look at the horses. But we both became upset over the way the animals were treated and how the horses were all so nervous and skinny. We overheard a man say that most of them would “go to slaughter.”



I remember feeling sick. Grandpa Joe said it hadn't been like that when he was a young man and involved in the horse world. He blamed overbreeding and irresponsible people who didn't make a commitment to their animals. He grumbled about it the entire ride back home. We both said we'd never go back.

"Listen to me, Kip—" Daddy began.

Suddenly, the donkey lifted his head in a most dramatic way and drew himself up to his full height, such as it was. He stomped a front hoof, just once, while taking a deep breath. Then he let out a mighty and agonized bray. It was even louder than when he'd come crashing out of the woods earlier.

"*EEE, EEE, EEEEE-HAAAW!*" And then he did it again. And again. And again.

And then, at the very moment the donkey finished trumpeting his final syllable, Mama, Daddy, and I were all shocked to hear another sound. A sound we hadn't heard in a long time. And it was coming from the porch.

Grandpa Joe was laughing.

