The Girl and the Midnight Donkey
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Mia loved Saturdays more than any other day. That was the day she visited the animal sanctuary at the edge of town. She wore her red dungarees and yellow rain boots, and she carried a green canvas satchel full of carrots. Today, she was going to see her favorite animal in the whole world: a gentle grey donkey named Jasper.

Jasper stood by the wooden fence with his long ears pointing up. His soft grey coat was brushed clean, and a white star-shaped patch shone on his forehead. When he saw Mia coming, he gave a low, rumbling welcome. Mia laughed and held out a carrot. 'Hello, Jasper,' she said. 'Did you save me a smile?'

All afternoon, Mia brushed Jasper's shaggy dark mane and told him about school. The sun sank lower, and the sky turned pink and gold. Then something strange happened. Jasper lifted his head, opened his mouth wide, and let out a long, lonely bray. He was looking toward the empty field beyond the sanctuary fence.

Mia tilted her head. 'Who are you talking to, Jasper?' she asked. The field was empty, but the first stars were blinking awake above it. Mia wondered if donkeys could talk to stars. She sat on the grass and watched. Every few minutes, Jasper brayed again, his amber eyes fixed on the darkening sky.

The next evening, Mia came back with her green satchel and a notebook. She wrote down the time of each bray. 'Seven o'clock, seven fifteen, seven thirty,' she whispered. Jasper always called at dusk, and he always faced the same direction. Mia drew a little star next to each note. 'Maybe the stars are singing back,' she thought.

Mr. Hale, the sanctuary keeper, walked over. He wore his olive-green jacket and flat cap, and a clipboard was tucked under his arm. 'You've been watching Jasper very closely,' he said with a warm smile. 'What have you noticed?' Mia showed him her notebook. 'He calls at the same time every night,' she said. 'Always toward the valley.'

Mr. Hale nodded slowly. 'Jasper came to us last spring,' he said. 'Before that, he lived on a farm across the valley with another donkey. Her name was Rosie.' Mia's eyes grew wide. 'Is Rosie still there?' she asked. Mr. Hale looked toward the dark hills. 'I'm not sure,' he said. 'But maybe Jasper knows.'

That night, Mia stayed late. The stars sparkled like tiny lanterns. Jasper brayed, and Mia listened harder than she had ever listened before. Then she heard it—a faint, answering bray from far away. It floated over the valley like a secret. Mia jumped up. 'Mr. Hale!' she called. 'Jasper isn't talking to the stars. Someone is talking back!'

Mr. Hale brought a pair of binoculars. Together, they peered across the valley. In the moonlight, Mia saw a small chestnut-brown donkey standing in a distant field. Her ears were perked toward the sanctuary. 'That's Rosie,' Mr. Hale whispered. 'She's been calling to him all along.' Mia's heart thumped with excitement.

The next day, Mia and Mr. Hale made a plan. Mr. Hale called the farm across the valley. A kind voice on the phone said that Rosie had been lonely since Jasper left. 'We can bring her here,' Mr. Hale said. Mia clapped her hands. 'Jasper will be so happy!' She helped Mr. Hale write a list of everything they needed for the trip.

On Saturday, Mia rode in the sanctuary truck with Mr. Hale. They drove down the winding valley road and up to the farm. Rosie stood by a wooden gate, wearing a faded blue rope halter. Her fluffy forelock blew in the breeze, and a small nick in her left ear made Mia smile. 'Hello, Rosie,' Mia said softly. 'Jasper misses you.'

Rosie's soft dark eyes blinked. She sniffed Mia's hand and gave a gentle nuzzle. 'She remembers you,' the farmer said. 'She's been calling to Jasper every night.' Mia felt warm inside. 'We're taking you home,' she whispered. Rosie stepped into the trailer without any fuss, as if she knew exactly where they were going.

When they arrived at the sanctuary, the sun was setting. Jasper stood by the fence, his long ears twitching. Mr. Hale led Rosie across the grass. Jasper brayed, and Rosie brayed back. They touched noses through the gate, and their soft breaths made little clouds in the evening air. Mia held her hands over her mouth. 'They're friends again,' she whispered.

Mr. Hale opened the gate, and the two donkeys trotted into the same field. They stood side by side, their heads close together, as if they were sharing a wonderful secret. Mia sat on the fence and watched the stars come out. 'You listened carefully,' Mr. Hale said. 'That's how you understood.' Mia smiled her gap-toothed smile. 'I just watched and listened,' she said.

From that night on, Jasper and Rosie were never apart. Every evening at dusk, they brayed together toward the valley—not because they were lonely, but because they were happy. Mia visited them every Saturday with carrots and brushes. She learned that donkeys have feelings, just like people, and that a friend is a treasure worth finding.

Sometimes, Mia still brought her notebook and sat by the fence. She listened to the night sounds and watched the stars. 'Understanding begins with patient observation,' Mr. Hale told her once. Mia nodded. She knew it was true. All it took was a quiet girl, a lonely donkey, and a little bit of listening to bring two old friends home under the starry sky.