SAVING WINSLOW

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GUPPY
BOOKS

SAVING WINSLOW
Is a GUPPY BOOK

First published in the UK in 2020 by
Guppy Books,
Bracken Hill,
Cotswold Road,
Oxford OX2 9JG

First published in the US in 2018

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978 1 913101 14 5

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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GUPPY PUBLISHING LTD Reg. No. 11565833

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 12/20 pt Sabon by Falcon Oast Graphic Art Ltd
www.falcon.uk.com
Printed and bound in Great Britain by

For
Pearl and Nico
and
all you animal lovers



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WHAT IS IT?

In the laundry basket on the kitchen floor was a lump.

'Another dead thing?' Louie asked.

'Not yet,' his father said.

It was the midst of winter, when night, like an unwelcome guest, came too early and stayed too long, and when each day seemed smaller than the one before.

Louie's mother stared down at the basket that her husband had brought into the house. 'Another one of Uncle Pete's, I presume?'

Uncle Pete had a small farm on the outskirts of

town. Anything to do with Uncle Pete usually involved Louie's father wasting time or money, or doing something dangerous like chopping down trees or racing tractors through mud fields, or disposing of dead animals. Louie's father had already brought home and buried two piglets that had not survived their birth.

Louie knelt beside the basket. A small grey head with black eyes and feathery eyelashes and sticking-up ears emerged. Attached to the head was a trembling thin body and four long spindly legs, all of it covered in splotchy grey fur scattered with brown freckles.

It was not a dog or a cat. It was a pitiful-looking thing and it was gazing at Louie. He felt a sudden rush, as if the roof had peeled off the house and the sun had dived into every corner of the kitchen.

'A goat?' he asked, kneeling beside the basket.

'No, a donkey,' his father said. 'A mini donkey, born last night.'

'A mini donkey?' Louie's hand cupped the donkey's head, patting it gently. The donkey seemed too weak to move. 'Something wrong with it?'

'The mother is sick, can't take care of it.'

'Poor mama,' Louie said. 'Poor baby. What will happen to it?'

'Probably go downhill fast. Might last a day or two.'

'No!'

'So,' his mother said, 'why do *you* have the donkey? Why did you bring it home if it might just die in a day or two?'

'I don't know,' his father said. 'I felt sorry for it. I thought maybe we could at least watch it until it – you know – until it dies.' He whispered that last word.

The donkey made a small noise that sounded like *please*.

Louie lifted the donkey from the basket and held it close. It smelled of wet hay. It put its face against Louie's neck and made that noise again. *Please*.

'Okay,' Louie said. 'I accept the mission.'

'What mission?'

'To save this pitiful motherless donkey.'



SOMETHING DIFFERENT APPROACHING

Louie's house was old and cold and drafty and leaky, rising up out of its stone cellar with good intention but weakening as it reached the bowed roof topping the musty attic. The house was like many others on the narrow roads this side of town. Beyond the town stretched farmland and empty fields.

In summers past, the house had felt light and airy, with cooling breezes puffing the curtains in and out of the windows and always his older brother, Gus, there, so full of energy and purpose. 'C'mon, Louie, let's paint the porch,' and 'C'mon, Louie, let's clean

out that vegetable patch,' and 'C'mon, Louie, let's go to the creek,' always with something new to do. But now Gus was in the army, gone already a year.

And now it was winter.

And each day short and dark and cold . . .

Until this snowy Saturday morning in January, with the wind plastering the windows with wet flakes, when Louie had awakened feeling *floaty,* suspended in the air, with something different approaching.



DON'T LET IT HEAR YOU

Louie had not had the best luck nurturing small creatures.

Those worms he brought into the house when he was three years old? Those cute wriggling things dried up and died two days later.

The lightning bugs so carefully caught and tipped into the glass jar with holes punched in the lid? Dead on the bottom of the jar three days later.

The lively goldfish won at the carnival? Belly-up at the end of the week.

Blue parakeet also won at the carnival? Carefully

fed and watered and talked to? Three months – then gasped its last breath at the bottom of its cage.

The kitten found at the side of the road? Ran away the second day.

The bird limping across the porch and gently brought indoors? Flew out an open window two days later.

Hamster? Snake? Turtle? Lizard? Louie tried, but all of them, each and every one, either shrivelled and died or escaped.

More recently, he had been longing for a dog.

His parents thought it would be a better idea if he *borrowed* a dog from time to time. One that didn't *live* with them. One that didn't need walking in the rain and snow, and one that didn't pee on the carpet or chew on the furniture.

So Louie was more than a little surprised when his father came home that Saturday morning with the pitiful donkey wrapped in a blue blanket.

'I don't want to watch it die,' his mother said.

'No!' Louie said. 'No dying. I told you, I accept the mission.'

The pitiful creature tentatively touched its nose to Louie's. 'Awww.'

'Don't get attached,' his mother warned. 'You're going to be heartbroken when it—'

'Shh,' Louie said. 'Don't let it hear you.' He asked his father if it was a boy or a girl.

'Boy,' he said. 'Poor thing.'

His parents stepped out onto the front porch to 'discuss the situation.' Louie could see his mother waving her arms here and there, and his father nodding helplessly, shrugging his shoulders, as if he realized he had not thought this through. And then Louie saw him waving *his* arms and smiling and making a cute donkey face.

The pitiful donkey was trembling in Louie's arms, his wee head nuzzling Louie's neck, his long, spindly legs folded up awkwardly. By the time his parents came inside, Louie had a plan.

'He'll stay in the cellar. I can sleep there with him on the cot. Maybe we could have the heater on at

night. We need to go to the feedstore and get some hay for him to sleep on and a bottle and some milk formula.'

His mother's mouth opened and shut. No sounds came out.

'Mom? Will you watch him while Dad and I get supplies?' Louie handed the donkey to her, pushing him gently into her reluctant arms.

Louie's mother bent her head to the donkey, studying his sweet face. 'Go on,' she said. 'But I'm warning you both. He may not last the night. And if he does, he may not last another day or two. You're going to be so, so sad.'

'No!' Louie said. 'I will save Winslow.'

'"Winslow"?' Mom said.

'That's his name: Winslow. It just came to me, out of the air.'