



The True Story of an Irish Village,  
a Man Who Lost His Way,  
and the Rescue Donkeys That  
Led Him Home

# SANCTUARY

PATRICK BARRETT  
*and* SUSY FLORY



A profound story about a young man who found happiness in the face of much adversity. For those with mental challenges or addictions of any kind, Patrick's story proves that there is always help available. What is needed is the courage to seek it out. Despite setbacks along the way, Patrick found a pathway that led him back to his native village, his beloved donkeys, and true contentment. A most uplifting read.

PHILIP EGAN, nationally recognized Irish poet; author of *A Verseman's Harvest*

Donkeys have a reputation in popular culture as stubborn beasts. But as *Sanctuary* reveals, they can also be faithful friends—the very best kind of friend that is willing to carry a broken, traumatized man to a place of healing. Patrick Barrett's story begins in his family's Irish donkey sanctuary and invites us on his journey far from that place of safety and into a life marked by PTSD and addiction. However, that dark, distant place wasn't Barrett's final destination. *Sanctuary's* warmhearted, hopeful narrative is a reminder that there is always a way home—for each one of us.

MICHELLE VAN LOON, author of *Born to Wander: Recovering the Value of Our Pilgrim Identity*

From a man who had the good fortune to grow up in a sanctuary of donkeys, here's a true story as surefooted and mystical as the equines in his life. Shaped by his home village in Ireland, a strong family, and the deep friendships of rescued donkeys, Patrick Barrett leaves home to discover the world in all its beauty, sadness, and complexities. Only when he comes full circle—back to the sanctuary of steadfast donkeys—will he find what's missing inside. Patrick Barrett and Susy Flory offer a magical and yet very real story of one man's journey and

the miracles that present themselves along the way. If you've known a donkey, you'll want to read this book. And if you've never known a donkey, you'll want to find one after you read this book—a warm and victorious story full of second chances for both human and beast.

CALLIE SMITH GRANT, editor of *Second-Chance Cats*, *The Horse of My Dreams*, and *Second-Chance Dogs*; winner of Dog Writers of America's Maxwell Award

What a beautiful thing to watch God use such downtrodden, disabused animals as donkeys to help restore and redeem a human soul. Patrick Barrett's story is inspiring, yearning, uplifting, hopeful, and right on time for our broken, hurting world.

PATRICIA RAYBON, author of *My First White Friend: Confessions on Race, Love, and Forgiveness* and *I Told the Mountain to Move: Learning to Pray So Things Change*

*Sanctuary* is a book for anyone longing to be inspired, whose soul craves being seen, or who needs a reminder that redemption is possible—no matter your situation. Reading this book felt like taking a walk through the hills of southern Ireland with Patrick Barrett and the rescue donkeys who helped him find his way home. Full of personal stories—some heartwarming, some heartbreaking, each a testimony to the power of redemption—*Sanctuary* is a must-read for any fan of memoir.

JENNIFER MARSHALL BLEAKLEY, author of *Joey: How a Blind Rescue Horse Helped Others Learn to See*, and *Pawverbs: 100 Inspirations to Delight an Animal Lover's Heart*

*Sanctuary* spoke to me on many levels. This is a story about healing, becoming part of a herd, and returning to a literal and

spiritual rock that held a place for this sensitive soul, all along. I found the spiritual content compelling and gently told; this is an exquisite and deeply honest spiritual memoir. Highly recommended!

JENNIFER GRANT, author of *Dimming the Day*

“Who rescued who?” Those of us who have rescued animals know how true this bumper-sticker sentiment is! And indeed, Patrick Barrett’s story of how rescue donkeys “led him home” speaks beautifully to how rescue and redemption work in this world. *Sanctuary* is a marvelous, hope-giving work, perfect for those invested in animal rescue and those who need to be reminded that God is in the rescue and redemption business.

CARYN RIVADENEIRA, author of the Helper Hounds series and the forthcoming *Saints of Feather & Fang: How the Animals We Love and Fear Connect Us to God*

As a survivor of medical trauma, I know firsthand the terrifying grip of PTSD and the powerful and surprising comfort an intuitive animal can provide. From the first page, *Sanctuary* captivated me with the beauty of the Irish landscape, Patrick’s heartbreaking and hope-filled journey, and the steadfast wisdom of donkeys and their herds all along the way. Best of all, I was reminded of the truth that likewise healed me: We are never alone.

MICHELE CUSHATT, author of *Relentless: The Unshakeable Presence of a God Who Never Leaves*

Patrick Barrett had an uncanny connection with the donkeys that his family rescued. But who would ever predict how those donkeys would ultimately help rescue *him*? Set in the lush, mystical green hills of Ireland, *Sanctuary* is a poignant story

of addiction, recovery, community, the hope we find in the sanctuary of God's love, and the animals and people who walk beside us.

KERI WYATT KENT, founder of A Powerful Story; author of *GodSpace: Embracing the Inconvenient Adventure of Intimacy with God*

My first impulse when reading *Sanctuary* was to find and snuggle a donkey foal, much like the one who appears in the opening and at the close of this excellent book. My second—and more significant—impulse was to feel wonder at God's great gifts: the gift of animals' healing ability but also of redemption, grace, and love. Patrick Barrett's lively (and lovely) story bears witness to the powerful presence of God's abundant love in the most unlikely places, including the Donkey Sanctuary Ireland where Barrett calls home.

MELANIE SPRINGER MOCK, professor of English at George Fox University, Newberg, Oregon; author of *Worthy: Finding Yourself in a World Expecting Someone Else*

*Sanctuary* is a multifaceted love story. It's a tale of the restorative connection between a sensitive, stubborn man and the equally intuitive, willful donkeys in his life. It's a drama that spotlights the redemptive grace of God and the rejuvenated life possible when a lost soul finds refuge in him. And it's a testimony to the tenacity of praying parents who never ever give up.

CHERI GREGORY, coauthor of *Sensitive & Strong: A Guide for Highly Sensitive Persons and Those Who Love Them*

Against a backdrop of misty emerald hills and sacred stone walls is a true story of a restless wanderer struggling to find peace in the midst of brokenness. For Patrick Barrett, taking in donkeys that were abandoned, abused, and neglected was part of his

Irish heritage for as long as he could remember. His connection ran deeper than changing straw or binding up wounds; he understood how it felt to be a misfit and wrestle with knowing who you really are. Brilliantly written and engaging from the first page to the last, *Sanctuary* speaks to anyone who has ever lost their way and found that the road they hoped would lead to a place of belonging is sometimes the one that leads back home.

MARCI SEITHER, creative storyteller

You don't have to like donkeys in order to fall in love with this heart-wrenching, heartwarming, and hope-filled book. Only an Irishman could make a tale so painful and harrowing such an utter delight. I especially recommend *Sanctuary* to anyone who loves and is praying for a prodigal. Patrick Barrett's miraculous and redemptive story will give you hope that no one is ever too far away from God's rescue and home.

ALISON HODGSON, author of *The Pug List: A Ridiculous Little Dog, a Family Who Lost Everything, and How They All Found Their Way Home*

Is there anything purer than a redemption story? Whether the redeemed is man or beast, you cannot help but root for the one who is desperately trying to find their way home. *Sanctuary* gives us not only a beautiful story, but a wee bit of permission to believe in miracles and the hope that those we love who are lost can be found once again.

KATHI LIPP, bestselling author of *The Husband Project* and *Ready for Anything*



s a n c t u a r y



The True Story of an Irish Village,  
a Man Who Lost His Way,  
and the Rescue Donkeys That  
Led Him Home

# s a n c t u a r y

PATRICK BARRETT  
*and* SUSY FLORY

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Designed by Ron C. Kaufmann

Edited by Bonne Steffen

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#### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-1-4964-4500-1 (HC)

ISBN 978-1-4964-4501-8 (SC)

Printed in the United States

28 27 26 25 24 23 22  
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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# FOREWORD

YOU JUST NEVER KNOW where life will take you. One day I was working as a sales manager for a computer company, and the next my life had forever changed. My office was located on the seventy-eighth floor of Tower One of the World Trade Center. On September 11, 2001, I escaped the tower safely, along with my brave guide dog, Roselle, and within hours the media learned about my story. Nine years later I received a phone call from Susy Flory who was writing a book about dogs and their tales. After hearing what had happened to me, she said we should write a book together. And suddenly, overnight, my life took another turn. We collaborated and in 2012, *Thunder Dog* was published.

I have been around dogs all my life. I have been teaming with guide dogs since 1964. Some of the most remarkable experiences I have ever had have been forming a real team relationship with each of the remarkable guides I have had the honor to meet.

Patrick Barrett, whether he realized it at first or not, was also creating similar bonds with rescued donkeys. More than once, those relationships saved his life. In so many ways, this book shows the value of each creature God has created and why we should

never take our animal friends for granted. As Patrick Barrett demonstrates, when we help—through love—each creature we meet, we also, sometimes in unexpected ways, help ourselves to be better.

*Sanctuary* is a love story on several levels. It is a memoir of a man who encountered many life challenges and overcame them. Right from the beginning, I was drawn in, and I just knew Patrick would come through and persevere even at his lowest point, all because of his donkey friends. I hope you find a quiet place and let yourself be drawn in by the word pictures Susy and Patrick paint.

I believe every book, fiction or nonfiction, teaches us something. Some books' lessons are more powerful than others, and the stories these books have to tell are made all the more poignant when written by great storytellers. Sit back and be prepared to go on a real-life journey with Patrick Barrett. Together, he and Susy Flory tell a great story.

*Michael Hingson*

PROLOGUE

RAISED  
BY DONKEYS



*Who do you think set the wild donkey free,  
opened the corral gates and let him go?  
I gave him the whole wilderness to roam in.*

JOB 39:5, MSG

I GREW UP ON THE BACK OF A DONKEY, a restless daydreamer who loved setting out to explore what I would come to see as paradise, although I didn't really appreciate Ireland until I nearly lost it.

I live, and I belong, in an ancient village called Lisscarroll in the province of Munster in the southernmost part of the Emerald Isle. We know which people live in what house, and the people before them, and the people before them. We cross ourselves when we pass by graveyards and we know who lives in those places too. We have thousands of years of history and it's in our bones and our blood, our stories and our songs. We're a land of dreamers, story keepers, and storytellers.

In the olden days, Munster was one of the kingdoms of Gaelic Ireland, ruled over by a king of kings, or *rí ruirech*. My namesake, St. Patrick, spent several years in our area, founding churches and

training holy men and women to carry on the work he had started. Later, the Vikings and then the English arrived, with much blood spent on both sides in the cause of freedom. We Irish are known for fierce resistance against any and all oppression, and we are fighters, although we haven't always won. We're also lovers, and we love our ancient sports, our whiskey, our heritage, our villages, and our families.

Liscarroll was a magical place to grow up. There was a holy well called *Tobar Mhuire*, Gaelic for Mary's Well. People brought pieces of paper with their needs scratched in pencil and tied bits of cloth to the trees around the well. There is a ruined stone church, an ancient graveyard full of ancestors, and the great Liscarroll Castle, with four massive round towers looming over one end of the village.

As a boy I loved to run around inside the ruins, pretending I was a warrior fighting off the bad guys and saving the day. I remember a local lad running atop the stone wall one day and falling off. It was a long fall and he crushed his ankle, but that didn't stop me. I had battles to fight!

Among the rolling green fields around the village were strange groupings of trees, perfect circles of oak, ash, hazel, birch, and willow, called fairy rings. No farmer dared cut down these trees or in any way disturb these unearthly places for fear of what mischief the angry fairies might bring upon his head, so they've been untouched for centuries. While the crumbling castle didn't scare me, I had more respect for the fairies and left them alone. Ireland is a place full of stories, legends, and mysteries, but to me it's just home, so it is.

My early life was a bit like a fairy tale. We lived on a beautiful farm in the green hills of County Cork, crisscrossed by mossy stone boundary walls wrapped in brambles. That family farm became a donkey sanctuary where thousands of donkeys were rescued

because Mam and Dad had soft hearts and open arms for all living things. When my dad saw a donkey that needed help, he brought it home to my mam.

My mam's name is Eileen and everyone says there wouldn't be a donkey sanctuary without her, and that she helped my dad's dreams of helping the donkeys come true. But back then she was just Mam, a typical Irish mother, strong and no-nonsense and the backbone of our little corner of Ireland, showing her love in the kitchen. I felt her love every time she fed me and my three older sisters, Debbie, Helen, and Eileen, with scones hot from the oven.

The donkey sanctuary was on our family farm, but my mother *was* the sanctuary.

Mam and Dad started the sanctuary because the sad truth is that we Irish have not always loved our donkeys as we should have. For hundreds of years, these funny four-legged creatures have served our people willingly and well. People loved the work they did—carting fresh milk to the creamery; transporting seaweed from the beach; bringing vegetables to market, haystacks from the fields, peat from the bogs; and bearing people on their backs or pulling them along in carts. Many is the donkey who found its own way home with his owner asleep in the cart, bumping along behind after a few too many pints at the pub.

Yet the donkeys didn't have much work to do once the tractor invaded Ireland. As a result of mechanized farming, there were thousands of donkeys all over Ireland who were no longer needed, and sometimes people got too old to take care of them or gave up on them when they became sick and left them by the side of the road to die.

But some of the lucky ones were truly seen and, like my first and best long-eared friend, Aran, picked up and rescued. I learned just about everything I know from Aran and the other donkeys who were part of my life—Timmy, Jerusalem, Penelope and

Peanut, Guinness, Tinsel, Nollaig, and Jacksie. Each one showed me something different about myself and how to live.

Now that I'm older, I've realized I'm a lot like a donkey because I don't always want to do what I'm told. It's not easy to bend a donkey to your will, which is why they sometimes end up abused. They have their own minds and opinions on things and sometimes choose not to obey.

Donkeys are much more than humble beasts of burden; they're smarter than horses, strong-willed, and very, very intuitive. If they're lucky and well cared for, they can live for fifty or even sixty years. They are also strong, resilient, loyal, and very hardworking. They live in big herds and stay together, taking care of each other like big Irish families.

But even though I had my own herd—a human family that was always there for me, with parents who did their best to raise me right—there was a time when I got separated from my family and the donkeys and lost my way.

I was born into an Irish fairy tale, but the fairy tale fractured.

At the sanctuary, I grew up in the donkeys' shadow, but I know I wouldn't be here today if it weren't for these stubborn and beautiful creatures. I grew up in a kind of Eden, but when I got older I left my little corner of paradise. Yet the sanctuary had my heart, and my soul was tied to the rock at the top of the hill behind our house, my favorite place in the world. Even in my darkest days I carried a picture of the village and the castle and the rolling green hills of Lisscarroll in my pocket.

The donkeys have always been there for me, loving me, accepting me, and believing in me when everyone else had all but given up. I learned how to talk to them and, even more important, how to listen to them. The donkeys led me home, back to the crumbled stone watchtower at the top of the hill where the donkeys gather.

And one night, when all seemed lost, God met me right there at the rock.

My life has been a series of tests. With some I have chosen well and passed, and with others I have not. But I am blessed because my mam and dad started a donkey sanctuary to save lost donkeys, never dreaming it would save me, too.



CHAPTER ONE

# DREAMING WITH JACKSIE



*Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten.*

NEIL GAIMAN

JACKSIE IS A FUZZY BROWN, SILVER, AND WHITE Irish donkey with a creaky voice and a big crooked grin. His mother didn't want him, so he has lived with my family from his very first days, and he has always thought he was human. When Jacksie first arrived, tiny and starving, he needed a big bottle of milk every three hours around the clock.

Whenever it was my turn for the night shift, I'd build up fresh straw around us into a cozy nest and wait for Jacksie to start nudging his tiny velvety white nose against my hand.

"Are ye hungry now? Hold on, Jacksie. It's coming."

I reach out and rub his withers, showing him the bottle and shaking it gently. Jacksie tilts his head, the tangle of fluffy hair at the top almost hiding his shiny black eyes. His ears are almost as big as his head, downy white inside and tipped with dark brown

at the top, like they've been dipped in chocolate. His muzzle is pure white, his lips pale pink, and below is a tangle of soft curly baby whiskers.

As soon as I point the bottle toward him, he lays his ears back along his head and lunges forward, grabbing the nipple and gulping the warm milk as he gazes into my eyes. I feel a twinge deep inside. I always do with Jacksie.

He's adopted me as his brother and during the day, whenever he hears my voice on the other side of the fence, he starts squeaking and honking in his baby voice—he can't bray yet and won't for a while. When I first open the gate, he tries to wrap his neck around me in his version of a hug or nibbles on my arm with his gums. He just wants to be part of my herd.

About halfway into the bottle we settle in and start to hear the other donkeys on the grounds of the donkey sanctuary, hundreds of them going about their nightly rituals in the barns. Some stand in the straw all night long, alternately munching on bits of hay and grain before lapsing into brief standing naps. Some lie down and sleep soundly, legs twitching a bit, dreaming of galloping through luminous green pastures on sunshine days. Others are more restless, moving around inside the barn, listening and watching, standing guard and giving out a bray when they hear a fox cry out in the fields. Jacksie's ears lift up a bit and twitch as he listens to the herds. Someday he will join them.

As Jacksie's tummy begins to fill and his gulping slows, his soft gray eyelids begin to dip down. His eyes are lined in black, flared at each end like an Egyptian makeup artist painted him with kohl. Around the black is a narrow line of white fur and thin silvery eyelashes.

The heat lamp overhead casts a rosy glow and I pull off my jacket, then let myself sink down and lean back into the warm straw. Jacksie goes down to his knees and starts to burrow, his back

tucking into my right side. His nose pops up again, and I crook my arm up and around his head, holding the bottle at just the right angle so he can drain the last few drops.

My eyes are getting heavy too and as I look at the bottle, I catch the shine of the scar, a jagged half circle, slightly raised, snaking across the underside of my right forearm. Then I fall asleep with Jacksie, and as the bottle drops from my hand into the straw above his head, my dreams about the dark-haired boy start. I know the young lad is me, but it feels like I'm watching a film and I haven't been a lad for a long time.

I'm standing on top of a big rock at the crown of a green hill and I can feel the wind blowing my hair. The rock points to the sky, and the flat surface on top is my favorite place in the whole wide world. My grandmother, who lives in the stone house below, says the rock is left over from a stone watchtower that crumpled a long time ago. Now I'm on watch, and I look down on the lane that runs through the middle of the village.

I can see the great ruined castle at one end—a big gray rectangle with a massive tower at each corner, built with limestone from the old stone quarry on my grandmother's farm. I conjure up bands of Irish warriors in dark green tunics and leather boots, holding oak shields in one hand and gleaming swords in the other, fighting off the bad guys and saving the people of the village. Someday I want to be brave and strong like that.

But for now, my brave steed isn't a great war horse—not even close. He's a small barrel-shaped donkey with gray and white patches, fuzzy ears, and stubby legs. His name is Aran. He lived with a very old man who couldn't take care of him anymore, and that's how he ended up on our family farm.

In my dream Aran trots up to the rock and I jump down, give him a hug around his neck, then vault onto his back. "Let's go, Aran!" He runs for a bit, then slows down to grab a bit of grass. I

lean down and rest on his neck, my arms around him. He's the first donkey I ever made friends with, and when I feel alone, he comes to me. When I feel scared, he comforts me. When I feel invisible, Aran sees me. We are family.

I slide off and we walk down the hill together. It's getting dark, and Mam will be worried about us. We walk side by side, Aran and me, and when we get down to the gate, Mam is there, ready to whisk Aran into the barn and then me into the house for dinner. Everyone says Mam has a way with donkeys. She can speak their language and get them to do anything she wants.

Outside my dream a donkey brays in one of the barns, and Jacksie stirs next to me, rustling around in the straw and wriggling a little closer. His back makes a warm spot against my side and his breathing slows again as he falls back asleep.

This time I stay awake but go into some kind of a dream state—half awake and half asleep—and this dream is a darker one.

I'm in a city, all concrete and paved roads and cars roaring by. The air is stale and sour, no breeze or smell of grass. People pass by me but don't look my way; I feel invisible. I keep walking, and everything looks the same. I'm hemmed in by dingy old buildings and nothing ever changes.

I stop and look at my reflection in a big window.

*Who are you?*

The carefree lad from the rock is gone. Instead, a man with flat black eyes looks back.

*What is wrong with you?! Why is everything so messed up?*

I shake my head and run my hand over my face, then look again as the pain begins to build inside.

*Why can't you get your life straight?*

I want to shout and cry, but I know that if I start, I'll never stop. I barely recognize the face in the window anymore. I've lost

who I once was and become a man infused with darkness and wreathed in shadows.

I can't stand to look at him anymore, so I make a fist with my right hand, draw it back, then put all my strength behind it and punch my hand straight through the massive window, breaking the glass and shattering the reflection of the man with the shadow eyes.

Then baby Jacksie stirs again, rolling over and rubbing his forehead against my arm. I reach down and stroke his neck and ears. I'm fully awake now, ready to get back to the house and crawl into my own bed.

I pull a bit of straw over his long gangly legs and leave him snoring peacefully in his warm nest, dreaming of scampering around green pastures with the herd. Then I'm off to rejoin my own.