

RACHEL ANNE RIDGE

walking with henry

*Big Lessons from a Little Donkey
on Faith, Friendship, and
Finding Your Path*



Walking with Henry is a breath of fresh air. Each page is filled with golden nuggets of wisdom that unexpectedly drop into your hand and heart like little gifts wrapped in packages of well-crafted words. If you've been looking for a read to snuggle up with, cry with, laugh with, and ultimately grow with—this is it. Rachel Anne Ridge writes the way she lives: full of grace, contagious joy, and a wide-open heart. That's why I know you'll enjoy this book as much as I have.

PRISCILLA SHIRER, Bible teacher and author

This tender book will pull you into Rachel's and Henry's stories and lift you up to Jesus. I love this book!

SHEILA WALSH, author of *It's Okay Not to Be Okay*

Who knew there are so many lessons about faith, grace, and letting go of past regrets that you can learn from a miniature donkey named Henry? *Walking with Henry* is the beautifully written story of two donkeys who had to find their way and let go of fear as they forged a relationship they weren't sure they even wanted. You'll laugh, you'll cry, and most of all, you'll never forget the impact the humblest of creatures can have on the way you view your faith and your God. Rachel Anne Ridge has written another heartwarming book that will charm you and challenge you in all the best ways.

MELANIE SHANKLE, *New York Times* bestselling author and speaker

Personal, reflective, practical, and profound, *Walking with Henry* shows us how the Lord can provide timely, beautiful wisdom from an unlikely and unexpected teacher. Rachel Anne's words are thought provoking and life giving, the very best kind of medicine for a weary soul.

SOPHIE HUDSON, author of *Giddy Up*, *Eunice* and cohost of *The Big Boo Cast*

A five-star read! Rachel is all heart . . . and wait until you meet Henry. Who will want this book? People who (1) love animals, (2) dream about farm life, (3) want to deepen their prayer lives, (4) have ever felt guilty, and (5) have a pulse!

PATSY CLAIRMONT, speaker and author of *You Are More Than You Know*

I'm not much of an animal person, which is why I am amazed at Rachel's ability to make me love *two* donkeys. This book is a thoroughly enjoyable reminder to be actively aware of the many ways God seeks to use the normal moments of life to teach us.

EMILY THOMAS, *The Struggle Well Project* podcast

When I first read *Flash*, I fell in love with Rachel's world. Never did I think the same magic could happen again! Yet *Walking with Henry* is filled with wit, grace, and beautiful lessons as we watch Rachel and her donkey friends live the life God has given them.

LISA WHELCHER, actress, author, speaker, and life coach

Rachel Anne Ridge has a unique and endearing gift of finding spiritual wisdom in unusual places. A rescued miniature donkey with lots of behavioral baggage arrives during a time of deep personal searching in Rachel's life. Her journey with Henry is a sweet and vulnerable story that will make you smile, think deeply, and ultimately worship our Creator God.

DAVE BURCHETT, author of *Stay: Lessons My Dogs Taught Me about Life, Loss, and Grace*

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For Tom,
my companion
and the love of my life.

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An Invitation

“It’s okay, little donkey,” I murmured, my voice low and reassuring. “It’s okay.”

I stood at the pasture gate, a small blue halter in hand and a braided lead rope looped around my arm. This long-awaited day was finally here, and anticipation fluttered in my chest. The buckles jangled as I pulled off the price tag that still dangled from the nylon nose strap. I knew the halter, made for a pony, wouldn’t fit properly on my new miniature donkey—a little too snug over the top of his head and too loose across the nose—but it would do for now.

Today’s lesson would be short. He needed to get used to me and become familiar with being handled and led. Henry was a rescue animal: a stray with an unknown past who was clearly uncertain about his present. I patted my pocket for the carrots I’d brought as a treat, then lifted the heavy chain link off the rusty nail sticking out of the fence post. Oversized ears swung in my direction as he listened to my cautious approach.

“It’s okay, little donkey,” I repeated, like a chant now. “It’s

okay.” As the words hung suspended between us, I realized these were words I longed to hear myself.

Will I be okay too? My heart wanted to know.

So much had happened to bring me to this day—and to this donkey. I swallowed hard and fought back a tear that puddled unexpectedly at the corner of my eye. Beneath my calming demeanor was a jumble of emotions: Regret. Sadness. Fear. Anxiety. Doubt. And . . . just a teeny bit of hope. Maybe somehow this small, dark chocolate-colored donkey could make everything all right again.

It was a big ask for such a little guy.

Though I didn’t know it that morning in the pasture as I knelt next to this tiny rescue donkey, I was on the edge of a pilgrimage.

Not everyone gets a moment they can point back to as their starting place, and fewer still get a donkey to journey forward with. But I would walk with Henry. I would walk, and I would try to pray.

At least, that was my goal.

This pasture would become the perfect setting for facing the anxieties over my circumstances and the unexpected wrestling with my faith that had both come calling. Outside, in a wide-open field laced with footpaths, I would find space to breathe and be invited to let go of the fears that had brought my spiritual life to a standstill.

Walking with a donkey, as I learned, is not done with the purposeful strides of personal achievement, but rather with the humbled steps of one forced to go at the pace of an unhurried companion. Although I couldn’t yet see it, ahead of me on the paths was a whole new dimension of finding God’s presence,

not only in His creation but also in the timeless prayers of the church—the voices of His people throughout the ages.



In the pages of this book, I invite you to walk (or amble, or balk) with me. Trust me, it's a slow process, so you'll have no trouble keeping up. There is plenty of time to pause along the way if you need it.

You see, I had always expected to pinpoint my problems and quickly find solutions for them. I attempted to quell my doubts with well-chosen Bible verses. My bookshelves were lined with every version of "Simple Steps to a Fulfilled Life." I attended conferences and retreats, and I listened to sermons and motivational speakers. I put on the armor of God and fought the devil. I filled the holes in my spiritual life with activities and productive practices designed to make me grow as a Christian.

But beneath the busyness was a growing realization that something was missing. I longed for a sense of the sacred, for an uncluttered faith that was open to mystery and wonder.

I needed to do something different. I wanted stories to ponder and safe spaces to ask questions of God. Yet I had come to a place in which I no longer possessed the words to pray. *Maybe written prayers could help me*, I thought. Somehow, I knew that I must walk with a donkey, with a book of prayers in hand. An ambling pace, coupled with quiet contemplations, would be the perfect antidote for my hurried schedule and worried existence.

A donkey cares nothing about human time-management systems, believe me. He is not concerned with the opinions of others or what is trending on social media, or what your theology is. A donkey will, though, disarm you, make you

smile, help you open the door to questions, and leave room for conversation. In fact, traveling with a donkey is like stepping back in time, sometimes right into the pages of the Bible and into the ancient traditions of prayer and meditation.

If you've found yourself in a situation like mine, maybe this will be a good place to start. Join me on a walk as we learn to let go, embrace a deeper faith, and find a way to the sacred. This path reminds us that life is a journey best traveled with a friend—one step at a time.

Prologue

Flash needed a wingman.

To be clear, in the seven years my husband, Tom, and I had owned him, Flash (in typical stoic donkey fashion) had never actually verbally complained about his solitary existence in our pasture. But I could see it in his stance, the droop of his head, and the shuffle of his feet—he was lonely out there all by himself. Obviously, he needed a donkey friend.

This would not be an easy sell to Tom. For the most part, he went along with my ideas. But acquiring a second donkey for the sake of the first donkey's mental state? That might be a bridge too far, even for him. In more than thirty years of marriage, we had honed the art of negotiation pretty well. I knew it would require several well-timed conversations to get the ball rolling in the right direction before going in for the closer. I thought carefully about how to frame the situation.

“Look how pitiful Flash looks out there,” I said casually over my morning coffee.

Step One.

Tom glanced out the window at the large, shaggy animal who stood near the pasture gate just beyond our backyard. Flash's brownish-gray coat was beginning to shed with the warming spring season, giving him a particularly disheveled appearance. He swung his head low and jutted out his bottom lip, as if right on cue.

Good job, Flash.

"No, we aren't getting another donkey." Tom leaped past my carefully crafted plan and straight to the punch line.

Rats! He saw right through me. If only Lauren, Meghan, and Grayson were here.

Our three kids would have cast their votes with me, and we could have come up with a compelling argument for getting another donkey. But they were grown and gone now: Lauren and Meghan were both married, and Grayson had recently left home for college.

When Flash had first wandered onto our dirt driveway, we'd all given Tom our best pitches for keeping this stray donkey that no one else apparently wanted. In the end, Tom didn't need much persuading at all, for he had already fallen victim to the donkey's charms. Flash's fuzzy ears, his soft brown eyes, and his endearing expressions had made the decision easy, and we never regretted making him part of our family.

Well, maybe once, but probably not more than twice did we have second thoughts. Flash couldn't help that he was inquisitive and opinionated—and weighed five hundred pounds. It's just that those characteristics sometimes got him into trouble.

Tom looked at me and grinned. "Remember the time Flash broke into the tack room and ate an entire bucket of grain? He

made such a mess in the barn, with no concern that his muddy hoofprints were evidence left at the crime scene.”

“I thought he was going to be so sick!” I replied.

I could laugh about it now, but when Flash stumbled over a stump in the pasture not long afterward, I was convinced his gluttony had caused laminitis, a condition that potentially leads to lameness and even death. Fortunately, Flash seemed to have a stomach made of iron—aside from a major bout of flatulence, he was perfectly fine.

The truth of the matter was that even though Flash was technically “my” donkey, Tom was the one he truly adored. Tom had initially worked with Flash to help him overcome his fear of people and learn to trust us. Day after day, for hours at a time, Tom would sit in the pasture with Flash. The two of them had a special bond that transcended Tom’s busy schedule and Flash’s knack for nosing into trouble.

All negotiating games aside, I *was* worried about Flash. Donkeys are very social by nature; without another animal’s company, preferably a donkey or horse, they simply don’t thrive as well as they should. They can become depressed (an actual veterinary term), lose their appetite, become uninterested in their surroundings, and get sick. Lonely donkeys can become bored and destructive, chewing on fences and barns and anything lying around. Flash had begun to exhibit all these qualities.

“We do need to talk about this,” I said. “You know that Flash still misses—”

“Yeah, he *is* getting worse,” Tom interrupted before I could finish. He was going to keep things light for me. “He can’t resist picking up and trying to break my ropes and extension cords.

He steps down on them and then yanks with his teeth. I can't leave anything out anymore."

He looked at me and gave me a wink. "Maybe we just need to get rid of Flash."

Tough talker. I slugged Tom's arm (he didn't even wince) and began making inquiries about companion donkeys.

^ ^

"I think I've found a good buddy for Flash," the private Facebook message from Doc Darlin said. Though his real name was David C. Duncan, he was known as "Doc Darlin" in the Concho Valley area of West Texas. The name suited him well. He was a burro wrangler who worked at a donkey rescue in San Angelo, Texas, where I had met him a year or so earlier while checking out the ranch as I researched information about donkey care. It's the main facility for Peaceful Valley Donkey Rescue, the largest organization of its kind in the United States, which serves to care for, train, and rehome thousands of animals.

When I parked the car that day, Doc was in the yard working with a shaggy brown donkey. It looked like Doc was training him to walk on a lead, and the donkey was having none of it. Front feet planted and head low, he refused to budge an inch. Doc eased up on the rope and bent over close to the animal's ears, whispering something I couldn't hear. The donkey cocked his head, seemed to think for a moment, and then stepped forward as if under Doc's magic spell. I was impressed.

Mark, the founder of the organization, introduced us. "Doc is our public liaison, so you'll likely be connecting with him in the future." Doc touched his fingertips to his cowboy hat

and smiled through his mustache. I liked him immediately and began to fill him in on Flash's backstory.

Doc was fascinated with how Flash had come into my life, seemingly out of nowhere. When I told him our local sheriff had confessed he couldn't get five dollars for Flash at auction, Doc grimaced. He'd heard stories like that a hundred times over.

"And Flash's adventures on our small farm in Texas have become the inspiration for a book," I explained.

"Well, I'll be," Doc said, shaking his head in delight. "Don't that beat all."

Now, Doc's message stared at me from my computer screen, in response to the query I'd sent some weeks earlier. In my e-mail I'd reminded him about Flash and explained I was looking for a companion for him, preferably a miniature donkey who was used to being with other donkeys. I needed one that would be good at hanging out with Flash each day in the pasture, as well as accompanying him to public events so he wouldn't be nervous—not that Flash had been asked to any public events yet, but I was planning ahead just in case.

I didn't tell Doc the main reason Flash needed a companion now. I couldn't tell him about Flash's grief, or my own—at least not yet.

Doc's message continued: "This fella is a miniature, and he came to us as part of a group of twenty strays that were rounded up in Henderson County, Texas. The sheriff logged him in as 'Number Ten.' I've included a picture."

Well, one glance at Henderson County Stray Number Ten's sweet baby face in the photo, and I was a goner. Standing next to a standard-sized donkey, he looked tiny! At only thirty-six inches high at the shoulder, he seemed small enough to fit into

a duffel bag! His stiff mane stood straight up along his neck, and his dark eyes seemed to gaze right into my heart. He was just what I was hoping for.

With a little more persuasion, Tom eventually warmed to the idea and was supportive, so we made arrangements to borrow a horse trailer from a friend of a friend. Tom would be the designated driver; we were hoping to make the ten-hour round-trip in one day, and I knew I couldn't do it without him. The trailer was enormous—large enough for two draft horses plus their tack—but when the day came, we hooked it up to our Suburban with a “beggars can't be choosers” shrug.

Rumbling down the highway at dawn, I turned to look at Tom. “I really want this new donkey to be a good friend for Flash,” I said.

But what I actually meant was, *I want him to fix everything.*

Tom reached for my hand and gave it a squeeze. “It's gonna be fine. You'll see.”

CHAPTER I

The Means of Grace

*Almighty God, Father of all mercies,
we your unworthy servants give you humble thanks
for all your goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all
whom you have made. We bless you for our creation,
preservation, and all the blessings of this life;
but above all for your immeasurable love
in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ;
for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory.
And, we pray, give us such an awareness of your mercies,
that with truly thankful hearts we may show forth your praise,
not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up
our selves to your service, and by walking before you in holiness
and righteousness all our days; through Jesus Christ our Lord,
to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit,
be honor and glory throughout all ages. Amen.*

Daily Morning Prayer and Daily Evening Prayer: Rite Two,
“The General Thanksgiving,” *The Book of Common Prayer*



Will our new donkey enjoy his new home? The long westward highway flattened out ahead of us as we left the rolling hills and trees of north central Texas behind, giving me plenty of time to imagine his first impressions. *I hope he likes us.*

With the giddy anticipation of an adoptive pet-parent, I'd made sure his living area was tidy and ready for him: fresh water in a large bucket, holding pen free of sticks and debris, and hay set aside to be served. Although I knew he would only see the barn and pasture, in my nervous zeal I'd cleaned the entire house and breezeway, just in case he might want a tour. I mean, you never know . . .

It was Saturday, official chore day at the Ridge household. As I swept the concrete floor of the breezeway, I mentally clicked through the rest of the tasks on my to-do list. With only Tom and me at home, there were fewer messes to clean up and no one else to blame for all the shoes left out and dishes in the sink. A good chunk of that blame rested with yours truly. What can I say? I'm just a humble tool in the hands of the Lord for refining the patience of the neatnik whom I married.

I rested my chin on the top of the broom handle and thought back to a memorable chore day several years earlier, when Meghan and Grayson were still at home. I had barked out orders to clean up their toxic-waste-dump bedrooms or else, while I focused my attention on the main living areas.

Tom's task for the day was replacing the driver's seat belt on our (then) fifteen-year-old Explorer. I could tell his patience was at the breaking point when he came inside to get a drink of water and said preemptively, "Don't talk to me."

I had followed orders, continuing to move from room to room through the house. Checking on the kids' progress, I jabbed my pointer finger first at Meghan and then the vacuum before giving Grayson a look that communicated my wishes: *Put down the Legos and get to work. And no, I don't care if you're hungry right now.*

Suddenly, I heard a noise coming from outside and looked up to see Tom banging on the glass sliding door that leads from the breezeway into the house.

I couldn't believe my eyes. My husband's face was contorted, and he was covered in blood!

Dear God, he's been shot! Oh, Lord!

My mind raced in a thousand directions, but my body was frozen in place. I knew Tom would collapse any minute, from sheer blood loss alone.

I immediately commenced crying and praying and looking for my phone so I could dial 911. It had to have been a shotgun at point-blank range!

How is he still standing?

And then I heard . . .

"It's P-P-PAINT! I accidentally punctured a red spray can, and it exploded in the back seat! I can't see! It's in my nose and throat, and it's everywhere inside the truck!"

Not blood—just paint.

We sprang into action. While Tom hosed himself down and got somewhat cleaned up, Meghan, Grayson, and I grabbed

rubber gloves and paint thinner. After madly ripping old towels into rags, we began wiping down the truck as quickly as we could. The back seat, the carpet, the backs of the front seats, and the ceiling were solid red, while the insides of the doors and windows wore a splattering of the quickly drying enamel.

We were like a CSI team cleaning up a gruesome crime scene, toiling for hours in the sweltering heat, not saying a word except for an occasional whispered request: “Pass the paint thinner, please.”

Finally Meghan asked, “Does this kind of thing happen to other people too, or just us?”

There was a long pause as we all looked at one another. There we were—sweaty, greasy, covered with red paint, our rubber gloves dissolving at the fingertips like decaying flesh—feeling like the survivors of the French Revolution in *Les Misérables*. Oh, mercy. We were such a pitiful sight!

The question hung in the fume-filled air—until we began to laugh . . .

When we pulled ourselves together, I assured Meghan, “Oh, no, sweetheart. This kind of thing *only* happens to us.”

We broke down in hysterics once again.

Just when we were feeling alone in our misery, a sparkling moment had been interjected.

I needed it just then.

So often I have felt alone in my particular trying circumstance.

Surely no one else drives a fifteen-year-old vehicle with a broken seat belt. No one else is forced to clean up paint explosions. No one else has struggled through failure and loss in the

same ways I have. No one else has experienced *whatever it is* that I am going through.

Sometimes I just want to know: Am I the only one?

Because it *feels* like I am.

Then, when I least expect it, a small beam of light breaks through the darkness and offers a glimpse of goodness. A reminder, perhaps, that I am never *really* alone.

Grace is present.

And if grace is present, then God is too.

Doc met us as we pulled up, directing Tom to pull the horse trailer to a spot near one of the outbuildings. We got out of the truck and stretched our legs after the long drive, taking in the scene around us. Donkeys of every shape, color, and size roamed in pens and dry pastures in all directions. Big donkeys, little donkeys, donkeys with babies, old donkeys. Seeing more than a thousand donkeys in one place at one time is almost impossible to comprehend. It's noisy, and dusty, and utterly overwhelming.

I couldn't help it: I immediately thought of Abraham and his flocks of sheep and goats, his herds of cattle and donkeys described in the Bible. *Is this what his nomadic empire might have actually looked like?*

Suddenly more questions popped into my mind: *Where did they get water? What did the animals eat? How did Abraham's hired hands keep the animals from running off? What did they do with all the poop?* It must have been quite an operation!

"Howdy!" Doc shook our hands and introduced himself to Tom. Wearing a cowboy hat with a crumpled brim, a red bandana around his neck, and work-worn Western boots, Doc

looked as if he had stepped out of the pages of a history book. We weren't the least bit surprised to learn he sometimes participates in 1800s-era historic reenactments. He could certainly carry off the part of a Civil War soldier or a Wild West cowboy.

"I know y'all are anxious to meet your new donkey, so let's go on over to where he's waitin' for ya," Doc said with a smile. "I'll let y'all get to know each other a bit, and then we'll head inside to fill out the paperwork."

We rounded the corner, and there he was: Henderson Number Ten. Freshly brushed and groomed, he was haltered on a lead rope and voraciously eating tufts of green grass in the yard. While I held out my hands for the donkey to smell, a volunteer named Margaret, who was holding his lead rope, told us what little the ranch knew about him.

"All we really know is that he was found wandering around Henderson County with a bunch of other donkeys. He was the only mini in the group, which means he probably knows how to hold his own. We don't think he's been handled a lot, but he has an engaging personality, and he's not afraid of people," she said, ruffling his ears. Margaret had the compassionate air of a true animal lover, and I could see she thought highly of this one.

The donkey ignored my outstretched hands in favor of the grass, so I knelt down next to him and began to stroke his neck. His dark summer coat was smooth and shiny, with an even darker "cross" marking on his shoulders. His stubby legs had faint stripes below the knees, and his tail swished flies rather futilely. Two soft ears twitched this way and that, letting me know that even though he seemed focused solely on his

snack, he was paying attention to my voice and presence. He had a warm-gray muzzle that matched the light-colored circles around his eyes. In short, he was adorable.

I was smitten.

Doc jumped in. “We think he is about seven or eight years old, and he has a great disposition. Since he’s used to being part of a herd, he’s not going to have any problems socializing with Flash. In fact, he will probably really enjoy having one single friend.”

“What’s up with his stomach?” Tom asked.

“Yeah, he’s pretty round,” Doc laughed. “But that’s perfectly normal. Minis don’t have a whole lot of room for their organs and stomach, so they always look kinda fat.”

Hey, now. That’s my donkey you’re talking about! I was already defensive.

Doc continued. “Since we knew he might be around a lot of people, we actually led him in a parade last weekend to see how he would do. He was fantastic! He just walked right along like he knew what he was doing. Didn’t balk or anything!”

I swelled with pride. *My goodness, my donkey didn’t balk in a parade!*

Not only that, but Henderson Number Ten also jumped up into the horse trailer like a professional after the adoption paperwork was done and we were ready to leave. The donkey looked ridiculously small inside the cavernous space, the soft tips of his brown ears just reaching the bottom of the window openings along the side of the trailer. Tom closed the door and secured it.

“Now, just a word of caution,” Doc said. “When donkeys get nervous, they tend to have explosive diarrhea. Don’t be alarmed

if this happens. He's already been through who-knows-what, and he'll have to get used to lots of new things, including Flash."

He gave the trailer a couple of taps and smiled. "On that note, good luck to y'all!"

Grace.

Right now, grace looked like a charming miniature donkey in a big old horse trailer making its way across Texas in the fading daylight. It looked like a chance to pick up some broken pieces and begin again.

An artist I admire has said,

I have discovered that something is awakened through failure, tragedy, and disappointment. It is a place of learning and potential creativity. In such moments you can get lost in despair or denial, or you can recognize the failure and run toward the hope of something new.

I've experienced grace in a thousand ways in my life and missed it in a thousand more. Maybe it's because grace rarely arrives with fanfare and a parade. But somehow, it always comes. After all that we'd been through to bring us to Henderson Number Ten, I had hope that grace would come once again.

I leaned back into the passenger seat and adjusted the pillow in my lap. (Yes, I have a lap pillow to rest my arms on when I travel. Doesn't everyone?) As we chased our long shadow down the highway toward home, I pulled out a small red notebook and opened to the first pages. Inside, I'd copied a prayer that I wanted to memorize. To this day, "The General Thanksgiving," from *The Book of Common Prayer*, is my favorite, perhaps

because it reminds me of that long drive home with our small passenger and my deep sense of gratitude. I stopped on these words and let them rest on my soul:

. . . for your immeasurable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory.

The means of grace.

One little donkey, out of a sea of a thousand donkeys, was traveling to a nice home tonight. He'd been chosen for a special job—hand selected to become part of our lives as a friend for Flash. I suppose you could call that a kind of grace.

My mind's eye returned to Abraham. Out of his massive herds of donkeys, he had one special donkey—hand selected for his personal use. Sturdy, sure-footed, and able, this donkey had no idea he was about to become part of one of the most pivotal and prophetic events in biblical history.

I could just see it: One morning, Abraham got up and saddled the donkey for a three-day journey to Mount Moriah. He brought along his young son, Isaac; two servants; and some wood for a sacrifice to worship God. I have no doubt that Abraham lifted Isaac onto his donkey (it was customary for women and children to ride while the men walked) and led him on the long trek.

That first night, they camped under a canopy of brilliant stars, the very stars that had once given the man then called Abram

such hope. Abraham squeezed his eyes shut, trying to blot out his memory of God's promise that his descendants would number as countless as the stars. As he lay on his makeshift pallet, he listened to Isaac talking in his sleep and the donkey rustling in the brush. *Only two more days to Moriah*, he thought.

Did Abraham wonder if his God, the one he thought he knew, had changed His mind about His promise? What a torturous night it was. As far as he could see, he had no option but to obey God's command to give up his son.

Perhaps Abraham's donkey walked along willingly in the small caravan of travelers: Abraham, the donkey carrying Isaac, a servant carrying wood, and another servant carrying food . . . all trudging through the wilderness.

But I know donkeys: Like all donkeys, there *had* to have been a few times that he balked.

Refused to go.

Stopped the whole procession.

I can picture the moment: a standoff between man and animal. But rather than take his frustration out on a stubborn donkey, this time Abraham patted the beast of burden on the head. He scratched his ears a little. Abraham, grieving with each step, savored every extra moment he had with Isaac, blissfully chatting away. The father could wait. He could give the donkey a chance to collect his thoughts and decide when to start moving again.

It's what you do when you walk with donkeys: You expect to stop every now and then.

Most days, I imagine Abraham was impatient with his willful donkey.

But these three days . . . oh, how he treasured each stop.

He looked at his boy, his beautiful boy, sitting atop his

daddy's donkey. Perhaps Abraham lamented that Isaac would never see his own donkey—a special donkey Abraham had already picked out for him. This one would have to do . . . a borrowed donkey for a much-loved son, on a journey toward sacrifice. There would be no other donkey.

Abraham's story *would* have ended sadly, except for one thing: *Grace showed up*.

Grace is the unexpected twist to this story, and it's the unexpected twist to *every* story. It's the surprise ending we can hardly dare to hope for.

In the nick of time, God stepped into the awful nightmare and stopped the whole proceeding. God provided a ram—its horns caught in a bush—for the sacrifice. Isaac, the apple of Abraham's eye, was spared and would go on to become a source of blessing for the entire world.

It was a dramatic moment that would be told and retold to Abraham's descendants for thousands of years: *This is our God*.

Our God is full of surprises.

Our God is gracious.

Our God blesses.

Our God will see to it.

Our God will provide.

Yahweh-Yireh.

It was time for a pit stop. Tom exited the freeway and pulled into a Whataburger parking lot. We were hungry and also wanted to check on our tiny passenger to see how he was faring. The sight of fuzzy ears sticking up and the sound of miniature hooves echoing in the trailer grabbed the attention of others, who wandered over for a better look.

One lady stepped onto the bumper of the trailer and peered inside. “Oh, a little donkey!” she exclaimed. Henderson Number Ten’s liquid brown eyes gazed at her, his ears perked forward. “Look how cute he is!”

Then she turned to me. “Donkeys always bring me such joy,” she said. “You have no idea how much I needed it today.” Squeezing my hand, she left without saying anything more.

She didn’t have to. I understood.

Just when you think it’s the end of your story, grace shows up in all its unexpected glory.

Sometimes, grace arrives as a moment of joy in the middle of despair.

Sometimes, grace’s horns get caught in a thicket, at just the right moment.

And sometimes, grace has fuzzy ears, a bristly mane, and hope for a new start.