

“You could’ve knocked me down with a bird’s feather. Gave me the shock of my life.” We’d reached the flat’s door by now and she made me close my eyes. “Surprise,” she said, and led me into the kitchen. “Alright Jackie, you can open them now.” And of course there was Mr. Skip sitting on the kitchen’s table by the tomato sauce, and smiled at me very knowingly.

Isn’t he just incredible!” Mum went on. “Finders keepers, that’s what I say. He was in our flat’s lock-up wasn’t he? So he’s ours. Mine.”

“Yes, Mum,” I said. “He’s your birthday present from me.” And then I told her everything. Well, not everything. I left out the bit about Mr. Skip talking to me. After all, that was our private secret. Mum went all weepy on me, and squeezed me so tight I could hardly breathe. As she hugged me there in the kitchen and told me how wonderful I was, Mister Skip was looking right at me and smiling. I longed to ask him if old Barnaby coming to stay had anything to do with his promise that I’d win at the races. But I couldn’t imagine how. I couldn’t ask him either, not until Mum went out later to get us our fish and chips. But when at last she’d gone and I sat down and asked him about it, all he did was smile at me. I decided to tell him about Gran’s donkey, Barnaby, just so he would know.

“Listen, Mr. Skip,” I said. “I don’t know what you’re playing at, but if you think I’m riding Barnaby at the races, you can think again. He’s the slowest, sleepest donkey that was ever born. I know. I’ve known him all my life. All he does is walk. He won’t even trot, and he certainly won’t run. So if Barnaby’s part of your big plan, forget it.” But Mr. Skip’s face was just beaming with a big smile. “It’s not funny.” I told him.

“I’m not laughing, Jackie,” he said suddenly. “I smile even when I’m serious. It’s just how I am. And I’m serious about my promises. I always keep them. You’ll see.”

And not matter how often I asked him, he wouldn’t say another word.