

Chapter 1

DEBORAH THE DONKEY

It all started one hot African night, when the silver moon shone as it rose behind the black silhouetted Msasa trees and finger shaped rock that pointed up into the starry sky. I could see it as I lay on top of my sheets, too hot for a cover and glad of the mosquito net that kept the buzzing insects off my bare legs.

I could hear the beat of the African drums, and the howl of the wild dogs. I knew there was a beer party in the district and the labourers would probably come drunk to work tomorrow but I didn't care.

The steady beat of drums lulled me to sleep, it sounded like hoof beats. In my dream I was riding a beautiful silver horse the colour of moonlight, I was galloping down sandy tracks between the bright red and yellow Msasa trees, jumping fallen logs and streams, galloping, galloping, galloping between herds of black and white striped zebras, bounding kudu with sweeping curling horns, trumpeting grey elephants kicking up dust clouds and proud giraffes with long necks and legs cantering as if in slow motion. My silver pony glided on effortlessly and I rode easily, proudly, happily.

A loud whinny woke me and I sat up startled. Bright sunlight shone through my open windows and I remembered my dream and how wonderful it felt.

Then I thought I would really like to have a silver grey pony that I could ride and jump. It wasn't really an impossible dream because we lived on a lovely farm in Africa and my mother trained horses and there was a stable full of horses, so maybe one could be mine.

I ran down stairs and asked my mum if I could have a pony.

My mother looked most astonished because I had never taken much interest in the horses. They were just there.

From three days old I had ridden Deborah the Donkey, wrapped in a blanket in front of my mother, the same way as Mary had carried Jesus.

When I was older I had been sat on a few horses and the donkey whenever we went for a picnic. Sometimes the gas stove and picnic basket, were slung over the donkey and I was put on top. Riding was just part of my life. Now I was ten, fairly small for my age, very dreamy and suddenly horse mad.

Mum looked reflective for a while and then said I had to care for Deborah the Donkey as if she was mine. If I did it very well I could have a pony of my own.



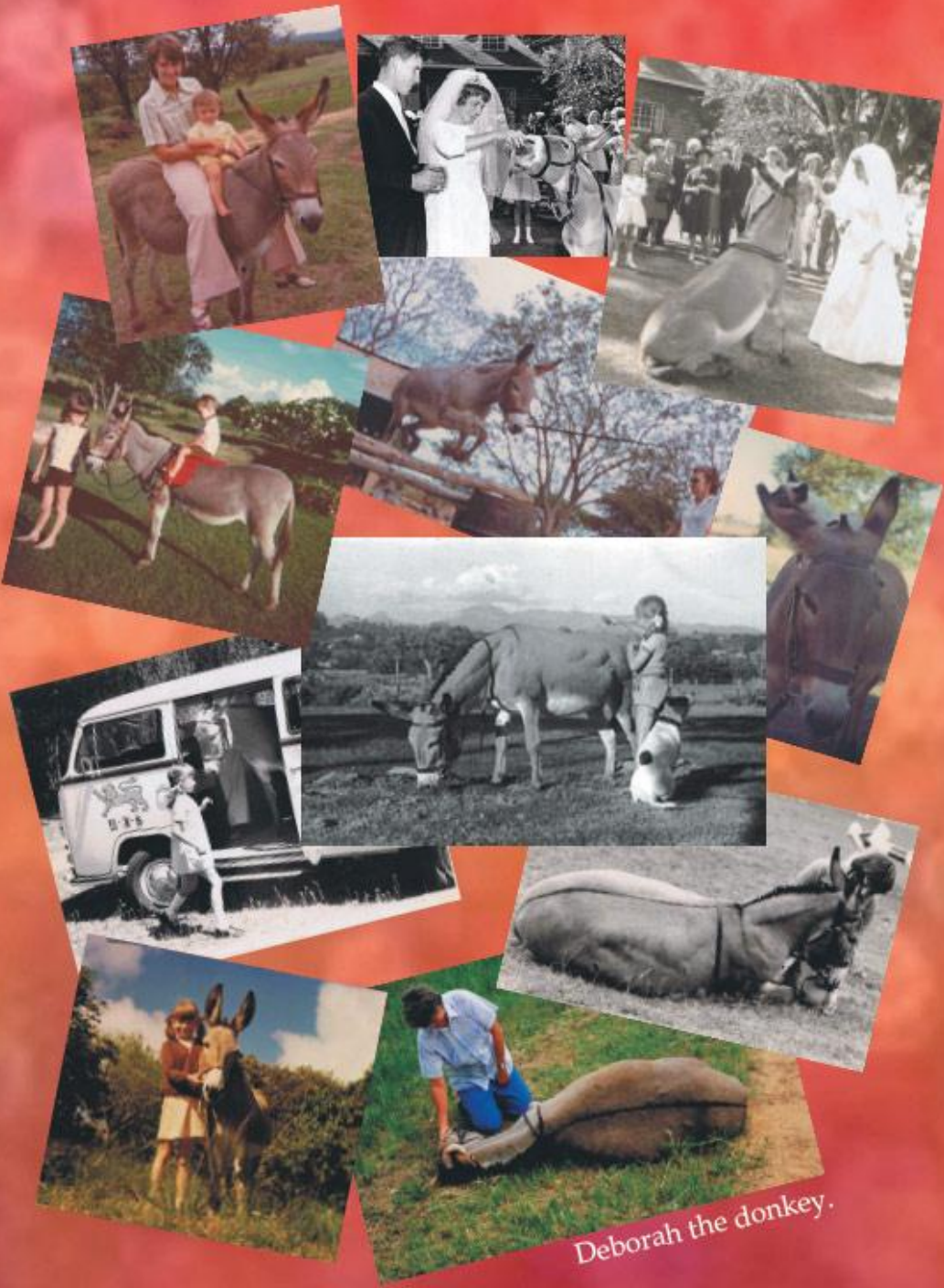
Deborah had been my mother's donkey since she was eleven. She was dark grey with a white nose, white around her eyes, inside her ears and on her tummy. She had a short black mane and tail and a stripe all the way along her back and a cross on her withers. I was told that Donkeys have this cross to show they carried Jesus, which always appealed to me. The end of her ears had dark tips and her eye lashes were black.

My mother had taught her not only to be ridden, but also lots of tricks. Whenever we had visitors they always wanted to see the donkey. Mum would ride her up and make her half pass and back. Sometimes she led Deborah over jumps such as deck chairs on their sides. As a young donkey Deborah had jumped barrel height with my mother.

Deborah would also lie down to command and lie flat like a dead donkey although she always groaned or sighed so we knew she was just pretending to be dead. She would sit up and drink orange juice from a cup. My mother's favourite story was about Deborah at her wedding reception, when she drank six glasses of champagne and refused the seventh. She didn't want to get drunk.

Deborah's best trick was the fact she could count. Deborah could add any numbers up to twenty by pawing with her hooves. She could even add up three numbers in a row as long as they were small. After all it must be exhausting digging up the earth for large numbers. She also could say 'yes' by nodding her head and 'no' by shaking it. Donkeys are very clever and Deborah understood everything people said to her. She always gave donkey rides at fetes and birthday parties.

On one occasion she had been invited to the School Fete. The School Combie had actually been sent to collect her. It had the middle seat out. Deborah enjoyed travelling in style. My brother Sean and I had to look after her.



Deborah the donkey.