



**WHEELers No. 1**

**Petrol Paws**

Emma Laybourn

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## **Contents**

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

# Petrol Paws

## Chapter One

Midnight.

The house was as dark as dreams; as silent as a secret.

Well, almost silent...

There was the faint *pad, pad* of four large, careful feet. A shadow stole across the kitchen floor.

A latch creaked: a handle rattled. The door swung slowly open.

Horace stood with his big front paws inside the garage, sniffing hungrily.

His forefathers were hunting dogs: wolfhounds and Great Danes. But it wasn't the scent of deer or wolves that made his heart thump now.

It was the sweet smell of petrol. The sour tang of steel. The earthy odour of rubber. Blissful smells. Horace breathed them in deeply.

Then he walked towards the car.

Joshua had taught him the trick of opening the car door just the other day. Horace had never tried it out before. Could he really do it on his own?

He pawed at the handle until the car door opened. He jumped into the driver's seat.

At last! Horace laid trembling paws upon the steering wheel. He'd waited for this moment for so long...

He pretended to turn a key in the ignition. The real car keys were in the living room.

"Engine on!" he growled happily.

He wriggled around in the seat. Since Horace was an Irish Dane, his legs were easily long enough to reach the pedals. He'd watched Joshua's Dad so avidly that he knew what they all were.

“Clutch, brake, accelerator. Clutch down, first gear,” he muttered. “We’re away!”

He jiggled the gear stick. “What a great start! Into second gear, third, fourth – and we’re already doing fifty. What a driver!”

Horace growled, imitating the engine’s roar. “*Rrrrow!* Into top gear! We’re doing eighty-five, and now we’re overtaking the Jag! Up to ninety. We’re going like a rocket. Nothing can keep up! We’re going for the ton! We’ve done it! *Neeeyow!*”

In real life, he’d never done a ton. Joshua’s father, Mr Hay, refused to drive any faster than forty-eight miles an hour. But Horace could imagine the thrill.

“*Rowll, rowwwll!*” he howled. “Go, boy, go! We must be doing at least three thousand revs!”

He peered at the dashboard. It was too dark to see, so he switched on the overhead light that Mrs Hay used for reading maps.

“Bend coming up,” he growled. “Change down, check mirrors and...  
**YOW!**”

It was the loudest howl so far.

Horace leapt into the air and landed on all fours on the passenger seat, quivering. He stared at the back seat, unable to believe his eyes.

Had he really seen *that* in the mirror? Impossible!

But there it sat on the back seat, a neat, striped coil with a rearing head and a flickering, forked tongue.

“SNAKE!” yelled Horace. “Help! Help! Snake! Snake in the car!”

“Ssssshut up,” hissed the snake. “You want to wake everybody?”

“This is *my* car! How did you get in?”

“I can ssslip through the smallest holes – and this old car is full of them,” said the snake.

“Well, you can just slip right out again! I’ll bark! I will! I will! I’ll bark!”

“You won’t,” said the snake calmly, “because think what a fool you’d look. You’ll get told off for being here, and I’ll be long gone.”

As it spoke it began to flow along the back seat, as sinuous as a stream of oil, and disappeared into a corner.

Horace stood panting and shivering. He couldn't see the snake at all until it suddenly reappeared outside his door.

"Ow!" howled Horace. "How did you do that?"

"Eassssy. I told you. Tiny gaps. I'm going now."

As it slithered across the garage floor, Horace scrambled out of the car and blocked its way.

"You're a burglar! I'll bark!"

"Don't be ridiculousss," hissed the snake. "I'm your next door neighbour. They bought me last week. I have to get back in my tank before daylight, because they don't know I can get out."

"Well, what were you doing in my car?"

"The ssssame as you." The snake gazed into the distance. "Just dreaming. Remembering a truck ride in a dusty, boundless desert. Lizards turn and run. The sun beats down like a golden hammer. I'm Kimi."

"I'm Horace." Horace bent down cautiously to snuffle at Kimi.

The snake smelt of leather and car seats. It was striped black and white like a miniature, rolled-up zebra crossing. Arching its long neck gracefully, it held him in a haughty yellow stare.

"How do you do, Horace," it said regally. "I am a king snake from Mexico. Although strictly speaking, that should be a queen snake, since I'm female."

"Oh!" Horace wondered whether he should curtsy. "Where's Mexico?"

"I'm not quite sure," sighed Kimi. "But I yearn for the desert. And for a car to get me back there."

They both turned and looked at the car.

"But you can drive," said Kimi softly.

"No, I can't. I don't have the keys."

"Where are the keys?"

Horace hesitated; though only for a moment. After all, Kimi *was* a neighbour.

“This way,” he said.

Kimi glided across the kitchen floor behind him like a dappled shadow.

“Niccccccce,” she murmured.

“The keys are through here, in the living room,” said Horace, padding through the door. “Hallo! Who’s left the TV on?”

“*Miccccccce!*” hissed Kimi. “*Very nice.*”

“Move! You’re in the way,” said a small voice from the table. “We’re watching *No Speed Limit.*”

“Wow! Just look at that explosion!” cried an even smaller voice. “I love it when they blow up caravans!”

“They’re not mice, they’re hamsters,” Horace said. “That’s Tickety, that’s Boo.”

“Stunt hamsters!” cried Boo. He somersaulted off the roof of the cage like a small, brown, furry cannonball. Landing on the edge of the table, he glared down at Kimi.

“Don’t look at us like we’re lunch!” he squeaked.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” the snake said meekly. “I only eat on Tuesdays. I’m Kimi, your new neighbour. I take it that you’re petrolheads like Horace?”

“Petrol paws,” corrected Boo.

“And where are those car keys?” Kimi asked.

“On the top shelf of the bookcase,” Horace said.

Kimi slithered up the bookcase, shelf by shelf, until she reached the top. The keys fell, jangling, to the floor.

“Hey, Horace! Are you going to drive the car?” said Tickety excitedly.

“Are you going to do stunts?” asked Boo, his eyes wide.

“Will you hurl it through a wall of fire?”

“Or crash into a caravan?”

“No, no!” said Horace. “I’ll just try it out a little bit. We don’t want to wake the humans.” He picked the keys up in his mouth.

“Brilliant! We’ll come too!” cried Boo. He launched himself at Horace’s head, clinging to his ear with claws as sharp as tiny needles.

“*Ow!*” Horace shook his head violently and flung Boo off. Boo flew through the air and cannoned into Kimi.

“Watch it!” hissed the snake, losing her balance. They both slithered off the shelf in a noisy waterfall of books. Volume after volume toppled after them.

“Kimi? Are you all right?”

Horace stared down at the books piled on the floor. A stripey tail was poking out from underneath them.

“Stupid hamster,” muttered the books.

“Boo’s not stupid! Leave my brother alone!” squealed Tickety. Hurling herself at the striped tail, she fastened her teeth in it and bit hard.

The tail cracked like a whip. The book pile shuddered.

Then it erupted in a volcano of paper and infuriated snake, knocking over a chair, a lamp and a vase of flowers. The two hamsters bounced across the carpet.

“Hush!” begged Horace. “Hush! You’ll wake the humans! Oh, no – I can hear them coming downstairs now. Turn off the TV, quick!”

He threw himself at the TV set, and watched in horror as it toppled slowly over backwards.

“***NOOOO!***” Horace put up his head and howled.

The door burst open.

“*Horace!*” bellowed Mr Hay, standing there in his pyjamas.

Horace was trying to hide beneath the sofa. The hamsters were scrambling frantically up the tablecloth towards their cage. And a long, striped shadow slipped through the door, unseen.

Mr Hay’s eyes bulged. He glared around at the books, the broken vase and the TV that lay on its back blaring at the ceiling. He clenched his fists and opened his mouth.

On the screen, a caravan exploded.

And so did Mr Hay.

## Chapter Two

“Horace – fetch!” shouted Joshua. He threw a stick across the park.

But Horace lay down and whined. He was too depressed to fetch sticks. He was too chastened to chase, too sad to sit, too heavy-hearted to come to heel.

Mr Hay’s furious bellows still echoed in his ears. He wished he could explain to Joshua and his dad what had happened last night.

But humans weren’t as clever as dogs; they could understand no-one but themselves.

So when Horace whined mournfully, Joshua just got impatient with him. “Come *on*, Horace! Fetch!”

Horace lay down with his nose on his paws.

“Oh, you’re hopeless!” said Josh. Dropping the stick, he walked off.

Horace dragged himself up and followed with his tail drooping. How could he possibly run around when he felt so miserable?

He moped behind Joshua out of the park and plodded after him down Tintern Lane.

Then his ears pricked up. His nose twitched. He had detected his favourite smells of steel and petrol. They were mixed with the rich, enticing scent of car polish. They came from the car showroom on the corner.

### ***MORDLE’S MODERN MOTORS***

said the sign. On the forecourt, behind a low wall, stood a row of brand new sports cars. Red, green and black, they gleamed like precious stones. Josh stopped to admire them.

This was one of Horace’s favourite places. He loved it when they had new cars on show. New cars smelt so wonderful!

He hopped over the wall and began to sniff the tyres, his tongue hanging out with longing. He rubbed his back luxuriously against the black car. Its shiny panels felt as cool and smooth as water. If only he could own it...

He could put his mark on it. By instinct he began to raise a leg beside a tyre.

“Oh, *no!* You’re not really going to, are you?” said a voice from above.



A large, fluffy white cat leapt down from the wall and stalked round him.

“Of course not!” Horace lowered his leg hastily.

“Dirty, dirty dog,” said the cat in silky tones. “You’d better not. And don’t go leaving nasty hairs on all my perfect paintwork.”

“Sorry!” Horace backed away and bumped into a jade-green car behind him.

“Don’t touch!” hissed the white cat, glaring at him. “These cars are very expensive. They’re much better than *yours*. Your car’s rubbish.”

“What? What?” yelped Horace.

“That old blue biscuit tin on wheels. I’ve seen you with your head hanging out of the window and that stupid grin on your face. Why can’t you keep your tongue inside your mouth? You look such an idiot.”

“I don’t! I don’t!”

“Oh, you do,” the cat retorted. “And the funniest thing is, you look just like you’re pretending to drive. Hah! It’s hilarious. As if a dog could ever drive a car!”

“I will! I will!” barked Horace.

“Dear me. What an idea! A stupid mutt like you?” The cat sniffed. “I wouldn’t let you within a hundred miles of any car of mine, you filthy, scruffy hound.”

“I’m not! I’m not!” By now, Horace was getting all hot and bothered.

“Oh yes you are. And your horrid boy’s no better. Look at him, putting his grubby little fingers everywhere.”

The hackles rose on Horace’s neck. “That’s Joshua! He’s mine! Leave him alone!”

“Why? He’s a snotty little slug. And you’re just a mouldy mongrel! *Pah!*” The white cat arched its back and spat at Horace.

Quivering with indignation, Horace leapt at the cat. It turned and ran.

“*Rouf! Rouf, rouf!*” Barking wildly, Horace set off in pursuit.

The cat jumped lightly up onto a car bonnet. Horace followed, not so lightly. The cat ran across the shiny green roof. Horace thudded after it.

The cat slid elegantly down the windscreen. Horace launched himself behind it like a ski-jumper, ignoring the crack of a windscreen wiper snapping off.

As he rolled off the bonnet to the ground, the cat was waiting for him. Teeth as sharp as daggers nipped his paw.

“Ow! *Ow!*” Now Horace was really angry. He hurled himself at the cat, which dodged away. He smashed into the car door with a clattering thud.

“Hey – you there! Get away from that car, you horrible hound!”

It wasn't the cat shouting.

A huge man was running towards him, his stomach wobbling, both arms waving furiously. The white cat disappeared beneath the car. As Horace dived after it, he was pulled backwards by his collar.

“*Erggh,*” he gasped.

“You, boy! Is this your dog?” The big man lifted Horace up in one strong fist, almost choking him. “Can't you keep it under control?” he shouted.

“What?” Joshua looked terrified.

“Your dog's nearly killed Fang, my poor little kitty! It's left footprints everywhere – and look what it's done to my car!” He brandished the broken wiper.

“S – sorry, Mr Mordle,” stammered Joshua.

“Oh, sorry, are you? Your father will be, when he gets the bill. That dog's a menace!”

“Help! Help! I can't breathe,” croaked Horace, dangling from Mr Mordle's iron grip. “He's suffocating me!”

At last Mr Mordle let go. Horace crashed to the tarmac.

Whimpering, he hobbled to Joshua's side. His paw was throbbing where Fang had bitten it. He raised it pathetically for Joshua to see.

But there was no comforting pat for him. No kind word. Instead Joshua grabbed his lead and ran out of the forecourt, dragging him behind.

“Josh? Josh?” yelped Horace.

“Shut up, you stupid dog! Look at the trouble you've got me in. *Bad dog!*”

Joshua's face was wet, even though it wasn't raining. He ran all the way up Tintern Lane to the Hays' house, and dragged Horace into the living room where Mrs Hay was vacuuming.

"Mum! Mum!"

She switched off the vacuum cleaner. "Josh? What's wrong?"

"It's Horace! He tried to kill a cat at the car showroom and he broke a car and Mr Mordle shouted at me, and it wasn't my fault! It was Horace!"

Joshua's voice was shaking.

"Cat! Cat bit!" barked Horace desperately, trying to explain. When Mrs Hay didn't seem to understand, he took her hand between his jaws to show her what the cat had done.

"Don't you dare bite me!" she snapped.

Alarmed, Horace let go and backed off. He backed into the vacuum cleaner, which started up with an angry snarl.

Horace whirled round. Now what was attacking him? He leapt on the hose and wrestled it to the floor.

"Get off that, you daft dog!"

With the vacuum cleaner subdued, Horace rolled over. He lay on his back, waved his damaged paw in the air and began to whine for sympathy.

"Be quiet, Horace," snapped Mrs Hay. "You've caused nothing but trouble. Bad dog! I don't want you in the house!"

And to Horace's dismay, she shut him in the garage. At tea time he was given food and water: but no pats or cuddles. He lay down by the car and whimpered.

He was a bad dog. He was stupid. Daft and hopeless. He'd only been defending Joshua. How had it all gone so wrong?

Nobody loved him. Nobody understood. He might as well run away.

But he wouldn't get very far on foot.

Horace laid his head upon his paws and sighed. If only he could *drive* away...

### Chapter Three

“What was that?” Horace lifted his nose from his paws.

A scratch came from behind the kitchen door. There was a thump, and a faint squeal.

Then, slowly, the door swung open. Boo was on the other side of it, dangling from the handle by a string. Letting go, he tumbled into the garage and did a double roll.

“Ta-dah!” he yelled, bouncing to his feet. “Stunt hamsters to the rescue!”

Tickety came in through the open door, dragging the car keys along the ground. “Right, Horace. Let’s get this show on the road!”

“What show?” asked Horace, bewildered.

“Let’s go for a drive, of course! It’s the perfect time for it. All the humans are asleep.”

“That is what you wanted, isn’t it?” added Boo. “You did want to drive?”

“Oh, yes,” said Horace. “I want to drive away. So far away.” A lump rose in his throat. Once he had left home, he would never see Joshua again.

“Well, come on, then!” Tickety and Boo were already scrabbling up the front tyres of the car. “Open it up!”

Obediently, Horace pawed at the car door. As soon as it opened, the hamsters dived straight in. Boo sat expectantly on the dashboard while Tickety ran down the steering wheel to put the key in the ignition.

Horace heaved a deep sigh as he climbed into the driver’s seat. This was the moment he had waited for – yet now it had finally come, all he could think of was Joshua’s disappointed face.

“Don’t forget to unlock the garage door, unless you want a two-second drive to disaster.” The silky voice came from behind him. Kimi was coiled on the back seat of the car.

“Okay. I’m on it!” Tickety pressed the button on the key ring. In front of them, the garage door began to lift up smoothly and quietly.

“Chocks away!” squealed Boo.

A little nervously, Horace turned the key. Would it work?

His heart thumped as the engine growled into life. It worked! This was it!

He took a deep breath. Pretending to drive the car was one thing. Actually doing it was quite another.

He told himself that he’d watched Mr Hay drive often enough. He knew exactly what to do. And since Mr Hay had backed the car into the garage, Horace didn’t even need to reverse it out. Simple!

He switched the headlights on. That went well.

Then he carefully pressed his hind paw down on the accelerator pedal. Nothing happened except noise.

“First gear would be good,” said Kimi. “Let me help.” She twined herself around the gearstick. “I’ll do the gears. You put your foot on the clutch and take it off again. Slowly!”

A grinding noise came from the engine. Cautiously, Horace pressed the gas pedal again. The car began to jerk and bump its way out of the garage.

I’m driving away from my past life, he thought mournfully. Maybe when Joshua and his parents see my cold and empty bean-bag, they’ll be sorry...

“G-g-g-gently!” begged Tickety, jolting up and down on the dashboard.

“I’m t-t-t-trying,” replied Horace, his teeth rattling. The car bounced down the drive like a startled rabbit.

Now he had to turn off the drive onto the road. He managed to steer the car on to Tintern Lane with only a tiny scrape against the gate post.

“Second gear!” said Kimi. “*Clutch!*” The engine coughed like a bulldog with flu. The car lurched and gathered speed as it trundled down the road.

“Left! Left!” yelled Boo, swinging from the mirror.

With a screech of tyres, Horace swerved left. “Why?”

“I just felt like it,” said Boo.

The car zig-zagged down the dark street, the beam from the headlights swinging madly from side to side.

“You’re meant to go in a straight line,” said Tickety.

“I know,” said Horace. “I’m just about to get the hang of it.” His paws gripped the steering wheel rigidly. He dared not let it go; so it was just as well that Kimi had the gear stick under control.

“Third gear!” she called. *Crunch* went the gears.

“Where are we going?” asked Tickety.

“To the desert,” said Kimi, winding herself more tightly round the gear stick.

“Anywhere!” cried Horace, wild with misery. “Anywhere that’s far away!”

“Left! Left!” shouted Boo.

Horace swung left. Everyone slid right. “Where does this road go?” he asked.

“Who knows?” said Boo. “But it’s fun.”

It was almost fun. Now that Horace was learning how to steer, the car no longer swerved and jolted quite so violently. If he hadn’t been consumed with grief, he might even have enjoyed himself.

“Left! Left!”

“Righty-ho,” said Horace as the car whipped round.

“How far to the desert?” asked Kimi plaintively. “I’m beginning to feel a bit sick.”

“Not far, I expect.” Horace peered out at the dark street. “We must have gone about fifty miles already.”

“Left! Left!” yelled Boo.

Horace wrenched the wheel around.

“Uurgh,” said Kimi. “No more bends, please.”

“It’s a straight road ahead. Hold on to your fur! And your scales!”

Now Horace put his foot down. This was more like it: they were flying along. Soon his house and all his problems would be a hundred miles behind him.

“*Stop!*” screamed Tickety.

Alarmed, he hit the brakes.

The car squealed to a halt, and stalled. Kimi fell off the gear lever and lay in the footwell, moaning.

“What is it?” Horace asked.

“Look at that!” said Tickety excitedly. She pointed at a sign.

“*Mordle’s Modern Motors?*” read Horace. He was baffled.

Then he realised. They were not a hundred miles away at all. They had only gone a hundred metres.

He had driven round in a perfect square, and was back on Tintern Lane.

Tickety pressed her nose to the windscreen.

“Just look at those beauties! Oh boy oh boy oh boy oh boy!” she cried.

Before Horace could say anything, she and Boo had hurtled out and were heading for the row of gleaming sports cars.

“Wheee!” sang Boo as he scampered up onto the nearest bonnet and rolled across it.

“Vroom vroom!” shouted Tickety, jumping up and down on its roof.

“Come back!” called Horace in a hoarse whisper. “Let’s keep on driving!”

The two hamsters ignored him.

Kimi raised her head enough to peer through the window. “Hmm. Quite nice,” she murmured weakly. “A Kazlo Burlap DB7, if I’m not mistaken. 0 to 60 in 5.9 seconds. 251 brake horsepower.”

“Horses?” said Horace. “Where?”

“That car’s as strong as 251 horses. Very large horses, I might add.”

“Wow!” Horace considered this. “So what would that be in dogpower?”

“Ooh, about five thousand, I expect,” said Kimi. “Or twenty thousand Yorkshire terriers.”

“Five thousand dogpower!” gasped Horace.

“Brake dogpower, measured at the crankshaft.”

“Yes, of course,” said Horace. He opened the car door to summon the hamsters, and paused. “What’s a crankshaft?”

“It translates the pistons’ motion into rotation.”

“Oh, *that*,” said Horace. “What?”

Kimi rolled her eyes. “The engine burns petrol,” she explained. “That makes pistons go up and down. But you don’t want the car wheels to go up and down, do you? The crankshaft changes the movement to make them go round instead.”

“The wheels went up and down when I started driving just then,” said Horace.

“No, they didn’t! You just weren’t driving very well!”

“I thought I was doing quite—” Horace broke off.

Boo was screaming.

“Get outta here, you horrible moggies!” shrieked the hamster, sitting on top of the Kazlo Burlap.

Then Horace saw them. Slinking out of the dark shadows came the fluffy white cat, Fang.

But Fang was not alone. A burly tabby slunk after him, followed by a third cat – the biggest of all, as black as midnight.

Fang’s back arched. “Rats!” he spat, glaring at the hamsters. He didn’t notice Horace sitting in the silent car. “*Vermin!* They’re trespassing on our land. Let’s get ’em, gang! We’ll teach them a lesson!”

Snarling and spitting, all three cats began to charge.

Horace barked a frantic warning. “Run! Run!”

The hamsters ran. Leaping from car to car, they slid over wheel-arches, bounced off bonnets and tumbled across roofs. The cars clanged and banged as the cats pounced in pursuit, leaping from one car to another with a sound like a giant baby banging on a set of saucepans.

“Over here! Here!” barked Horace. He turned the key and started up the engine.

The hamsters raced towards him, two flying balls of fur. As he held the door wide open, they shot inside the car. Horace slammed the door shut just before three angry cats splatted into it. *Whang! Bang! Clang!*

“First gear!” he barked at Kimi, and stamped his foot down.

The tyres screeched as the car roared off.



“Great getaway!” said Tickety admiringly.

“Nah nah-nee nah nah,” chanted Boo out of the window at the incredulous cats staring after them.

Horace had never felt so good as when he saw the amazement on those feline faces.

Their eyes were like saucers. Their mouths fell open. They couldn’t believe a dog was driving! He chuckled as the car sped away from them.

“Are you all right, Tickety-Boo?”

“Of course we are. That was cool!” cried Tickety. “Can we do it again?”

“No!”

“Left! Left!” yelled Boo.

“But that’s our house!” said Horace. “Aren’t we going for a drive?”

“We’ve had a drive. We’re just in time to watch *The Manic Motor Show!*” said Tickety. As the car rolled into the garage, she and Boo leapt out and raced into the house.

Kimi slithered out more slowly and lay limply on the garage floor.

“I still don’t feel well,” she complained. “And we never found the desert.”

“We’ll find it next time,” Horace promised with a grin.

He hadn’t managed to drive a hundred miles. But it didn’t matter.

What mattered was the amazement on those cats’ faces. The feel of the road speeding past beneath his wheels. The roar of the engine as he put his foot down.

He had done it! He wasn’t stupid! He wasn’t hopeless! He could drive!

## Chapter Four

None of the Hay family realised what had happened. They had slept right through it.

If only they knew! Horace longed to show off his new skill. He would make Joshua so proud.

He was pretty sure he was the only dog in the street who could drive. But now, fired up with his success, he wanted to be more than that.

He didn't just want to be the speediest dog in the street.

He wanted to be the most souped-up dog in town. The fastest in the country. The first formula one racing hound in the whole world...

Right now, Horace was still in disgrace. However, that would all change when he was the world's quickest canine.

All he needed was a little more time; and perhaps some expert guidance.

Tickety and Boo knew all about cars. So, next morning, Horace trotted into the living room to ask them for advice.

"What's the best way to become a really good driver?"

"Practice," said Tickety. "Like we keep practising our stunts. Don't we, Boo?"

"You bet!" shouted Boo, as he abseiled down the sideboard on a bootlace.

"And the best way to practise is to go for a long drive. Last night's *Manic Motor Show* was all about long-distance rally drivers," said Tickety. "They take weeks and weeks to drive across the desert."

"The desert?" said Horace eagerly. "That's where Kimi wants to go."

"Well, it looked perfect for practising. It's all big empty spaces."

"That sounds just the thing," said Horace. "What do rally-drivers need to take with them?"

Tickety thought about it.

"Boots, a helmet and fire-proof overalls."

"And food," Boo added. "And more food. And emergency rations."

“Okey dokey,” said Horace.

“Can we be your crew?”

“Once I’ve got all my equipment,” Horace said; and he set out to gather everything that Tickety had listed.

Boots were easy. He fetched one of Joshua’s Wellingtons out of the porch, but thoughtfully left the other behind in case Joshua needed it.

A helmet wasn’t so easy. Horace poked his nose into Joshua’s bedroom to see if his old toy policeman’s helmet was lying around; but Mrs Hay was vacuuming in there. She spent a lot of time vacuuming and muttering about dog hairs.

“Out!” she said when she saw Horace.

So Horace obediently crept away. He went into the other bedroom, the one that belonged to Mr and Mrs Hay, and nosed open the wardrobe.

There were no helmets in there – but there was a nice hat that would do. It was a big, floppy, purple one with a lilac flower stuck to it.

Those were the boots and the helmet sorted. Fire-proof overalls were next.

Mr Hay didn’t have any in his wardrobe. After a moment’s thought, Horace burrowed in the chest of drawers. Pyjamas! They were almost overalls – they were about the right shape, anyway.

He dragged them downstairs. To make them fire-proof, he soaked them carefully in his dog bowl. Then he piled the clothes behind the living room curtains, out of sight.

Now it was time to find food and more food. Sneaking into the kitchen, Horace tugged half a packet of dog biscuits out of the cupboard.

He snaffled a slice of ham and a lump of paté out of the fridge. For emergency rations, he took his bone. He stowed all the food inside the Wellington boot, where it fitted nicely.

After hiding everything behind the living room curtains, Horace ran over to tell Tickety and Boo, who were snoring in their cage.

“I’m ready! I’ve got all the equipment!”

“What about a map?” yawned Tickety. “Rally drivers need maps.”

“Map,” yelled Horace. “Map, map!”

“There’s a road atlas at the bottom of the bookshelf.”

Horace found the big book and tugged it off the shelf. Flopping down on the open pages, he squinted at the maps.

Maps were not easy to understand. It took Horace a while to realise that all the little lines were roads.

“How can there be so many? Where do you start from?” he wondered. “And how do you know which way you’re going?”

He sighed. Why did maps have to be so hard?

Maybe if he was dressed like a rally driver, it would help him to think like one.

So, fetching the soggy pyjamas, Horace wriggled into them. He balanced the floppy purple helmet on his head. Now, properly dressed, he studied the maps again.

For some reason, it didn’t seem to help.

“I need brain food!” decided Horace. “I can’t think when I’m hungry.”

Trotting over to the curtain, he unpeeled the boot. He took the lump of paté to eat while he read.

The food *did* help. It helped Horace to realise an important fact.

“There are too many maps in this book,” he declared. “I only need one map. I’ve only got one car, after all. This page looks like a good one.”

So he took the page between his teeth and tore...

...just as Joshua’s Mum came in.

“*Horace!* What are you *doing?*”

“Map-reading,” Horace tried to say, as she snatched the hat off his head. When she tried to pull off the dripping pyjamas, they ripped. Horace fell over and landed in the paté.

“You bad dog!”

Horace rolled over, whining in protest. But Mrs Hay was following a wet trail to the curtains. She swept them aside.

Horace couldn't understand why she shouted so loudly.

It was *his* bone, after all. And they were *his* dog biscuits in the Wellington boot. It was quite unfair of Mrs Hay to take them all away.

And he was doing her a favour by licking up the paté off the carpet. There was no need for her to throw him out into the garden quite so forcefully.

It was no way to treat a rally driver. She just didn't understand.

Horace decided to demonstrate what he had been doing. So he galloped around the rose beds making engine noises and changing gear.

“Rarrhhhhup, rarrhhhhup, rarrhhhhup!”

Joshua came out and stared at him.

“Horace?” he said uncertainly. Then he called,

“Mum! Horace is making really weird choking noises. Do you think he's sick?”

“No, I do not. I think he's just a daft dog,” snapped Mrs Hay. “He's as daft as a chocolate teapot.”

Daft dog, indeed! thought Horace indignantly. Wasn't it obvious what he was doing?

He zoomed around the garden some more. When Joshua tried to catch him, he swerved across the geraniums and landed in the compost heap.

Joshua shook his head. “Poor Horace,” he said. “He must be ill.”

Horace lay there panting. His nose was full of interesting compost smells. But his head was buzzing with far more thrilling things.

The roar of racing cars! The throaty call of engines! The sound of speed as motors flashed across the desert!

## Chapter Five

Horace roared into the lead. The crowd cheered him on. Smoke rose from his tyres as rubber screeched on tarmac...

“Wake up!” screeched Tickety. “Time to hit the road!”

“What?”

“Hooray for Stunt Hamsters!” yelled Boo. He dived at Horace’s beanbag, did a back flip and landed on Horace’s nose. “Let’s go!”

Horace shook himself. He felt as if he was still rattling with the Doggie Vitamins that Joshua had made him swallow last night. He stretched and yawned, then padded stiffly to the garage door.

With his dream fresh in his mind, he got a shock on seeing the car. Had it always been so old and rusty? It was a far cry from the mean machine he’d been racing in his sleep.

And he was sure that most racing drivers did not have snakes curled up on their back seats.

Kimi opened one eye as he climbed into the car.

“I was *hoping* for some peace and quiet,” she said, glowering at the hamsters.

“You’re looking at us THAT WAY again!” shrieked Boo.

“Don’t worry. I’m not hungry yet,” she said. “Like I told you, I won’t eat anything until Tuesday. It’s only Sunday night. Are we going to the desert this time?”

“That’s the idea,” said Horace. Carefully he unfurled the greasy map page that he had rescued from the bin. Licking a crumb of paté off it, he handed it to Tickety.

“You’d better navigate,” he said. “I’ll be busy driving.”

He started the engine, and pressed the button to make the garage door slide open.

“Stop!” squealed Boo. “Wait! We’re not ready. Seat belt!”

“Quite right,” added Tickety.

The hamsters jammed the seat belt into the glove compartment. Then they jumped onto it and slid down it like snowboarders.

“*Tomahawk!*” yelled Boo, as they did double front flips onto the dashboard.

“Okay!” panted Tickety. “We’re ready now.”

Horace stepped on the gas. The car sprang away like a startled hare. It bounced down the drive, *boing boing boing* – and then it stopped. The engine spluttered and died.

“Bother,” said Horace. “It’s stalled.” A light went on in an upstairs window of the house.

“Hurry up!” said Boo.

“I’m trying,” said Horace, wiggling the key in the ignition. Meanwhile, a light went on in a downstairs window.

At last the car coughed into life.

“First gear, Kimi!” cried Horace.

The front door of the house flew open. Mr Hay stood there in his dressing-gown.

“That’s torn it!” squealed Boo. “Flee! Head for the hills!”

“What hills?” said Horace. “We’re driving to the desert!” He was getting hot and bothered, and the car wouldn’t obey him.

Mr Hay began to run down the drive towards them. The car bucked and bounced away from him and swerved into the road.

“Go easy with the clutch!” complained the snake.

The gears gnashed and grated like a rhino’s jaws. But the car was moving faster now. In his mirror, Horace could see Mr Hay waving wildly as he was left behind.

They chugged past the car showroom, where three cats lay lounging on the wall. As one, the cats sat up and stared.

Then, as one, they leapt to their feet and sprinted to the red Kazlo Burlap.

“They’re getting into it!” squeaked Boo.

Another engine started up: a much throatier, more powerful one than Horace's. It roared like a majestic lion. Headlights came on. The sports coupe sprang forward.

"They're driving it!" cried Tickety. "Well! What copycats!"

"Car chase! Car chase!" yelled Boo excitedly, bouncing up and down on the seat belt. "Come on, Horace! Give it all you've got!"

Horace glanced in the mirror. The white cat, Fang was at the steering wheel. He could see the tabby's head just by the gearstick, while the black cat had dived down to operate the pedals.

"Which way?" he gasped.

"Left! Left!" squealed Boo.

"No, right!" said Tickety.

Horace veered left. Then he swerved right. Tickety and Boo fell over.

Kimi groaned. "This isn't doing my stomach any good at all."

"Forget your stomach! Third gear!" Horace yelled. He didn't care which way he turned – he just had to get away from those cats.

For the dazzling headlights were right behind him. They shone into his mirror, blinding him. The sports car was far too close! If he braked now, it would crash into him in a crumpling heap of tin.

So Horace put his foot down and raced through the empty streets as swiftly as he dared.

The cats stayed right on his tail. The red car sped behind him as if drawn by a magnet, just a metre from his bumper.

"Shake them off!" urged Boo.

"I can't!" he wailed.

"Turn right here!" ordered Tickety, studying the map. "We'll shake them off on the bends."

"Oh no, not bends!" gurgled Kimi. But she was ignored as Horace wrenched at the wheel.



He was leaving the houses behind. The road looped through the darkness like spaghetti. Trees loomed in the headlight, reaching down to grab them with long fingers. Above them sailed the lonely white boat of the moon.

And still the sports car roared behind them.

“Left! Left!” shouted Boo. Horace threw the car left; it started to jolt down a very bumpy track.

“What’s this? Where are we?” he panted.

“Must be the desert,” said Tickety. “Not very sandy, is it?”

“No,” groaned Horace. “And we still haven’t lost those cats!” For he could see the headlights behind him bouncing up and down like a pair of silver yoyos.

“Second gear,” he gasped.

“I can’t,” moaned Kimi. “I feel dreadful.”

“Just hang on,” urged Horace. Kimi reached up and twined herself around his neck.

“I don’t mean hang on to me!” he yelled.

“Uurgh,” said Kimi, draping herself across his arms.

“Stop it! Get off me. I can’t steer!” Kimi was tying herself in knots around him. “Let go!” howled Horace. “I can’t control the car!”

“Oh, my poor stomach.” Kimi hiccupped and tightened her coils around him.

The steering wheel slid through Horace’s paws. The car pitched sideways into a wooden gate. There was an ear-splitting crash, and a fountain of splinters went flying through the air.

“Yippee!” sang Boo. “Smashing turn, Horace!”

Now the car was plunging through a field, its headlights swooping over tussocks of grass. Around them moved the pale shapes of sheep, like startled ghosts.

“Kimi! Get off, and let me turn round!” said Horace desperately.

“No, keep going!” urged Tickety. “The cats will get stuck if they follow us in here. Their car’s much lower on the ground than ours.”

So Horace kept driving as best as he could with Kimi wrapped around him. The car bounced *bickety-bockety* over the grass. Sheep scattered with indignant baas.

“Sorry!” called Horace helplessly. “Sorry!”

They reached a slope. He braked hard in panic. The car skidded sideways and then began to slither gradually downhill.

“Oh, no! Oh, help!” yelled Horace.

“Go go go!” squealed Boo.

The car went. It went down the slope, gathering speed, crashing through bushes and brambles. Horace stamped on the brakes and tugged at the wheel. Nothing helped.

“It won’t slow down!” he barked frantically at his passengers. “We’re all doomed! Done for! We’re going to crash!”

## Chapter Six

But the car hadn’t crashed yet.

It was still gathering speed. *Bumpety bump bump boing* it went, until with a sudden jolt they were all thrown up into the air.

“Help!” cried Horace as his head hit the ceiling.

“Ow!” cried Horace as his bottom hit the floor.

“Argh!” cried Horace as there was an enormous, echoing **CLANG**. It sounded as if the car had been clashed between a pair of giant cymbals.

And then everything stopped.

Horace, stunned, did not move for a moment. He shook himself cautiously, and peered out.

He couldn’t see anything. The engine was quiet. The headlights had gone out.

On the other hand, there were no engine noises or headlights following them either. So the cats must have given up the chase.

All he could hear were angry baas, and a dog yapping close by.

And even closer was the sound of running water...

“We’ve landed in a river,” whispered Tickety. “Awesome!”

“Uurgh,” said Kimi. She uncoiled herself from Horace’s neck and fell out of the car door with a splash.

Horace felt weak and shaky. Slowly, he climbed out of his seat and found himself standing in very cold water that lapped half way up his legs. Moonlight glimmered on the ripples.

“It’s not a river. It’s only a stream,” said Boo, disappointed. Kimi floated to the surface and drifted there like a limp ribbon.

There was an anxious bark from the shore. “You all right? All right?” A sheepdog was standing there watching them.

“I think so,” said Horace. “But our car’s not.” He looked dolefully at the water swirling round the tyres. The driver’s door swung from its hinges. “Oh, help! We’ll never get it out of here!”

“It’s stuck for sure,” agreed the sheepdog, bounding through the stream to join him. “But it’ll be safe enough for now.”

“*Safe?*”

“Well, no-one’s going to steal it, are they? You’re miles from anywhere. It’s safe enough until you get a tow truck to come and pull it out.”

“A tow truck?” wailed Horace. “I don’t even know how to get myself back home, let alone get a tow truck!”

He lifted his nose to the moon and howled in dark despair. “*Ow-ooooh...*”

“Now, now,” said the sheepdog. “It’s not that bad. How did you end up here, anyway?”

“We were being chased by cats.”

The sheepdog chuckled. “Cats, eh? That’s a new one. You’re from town, aren’t you? Well, don’t worry! I can herd you – I mean, I can show you the way back to your home.”

“Really?”

“No problem. I’m Max, from Lott’s farm over those fields,” said the sheepdog. “Were you really driving that car yourself? I’m very impressed!”

Horace felt a little better; but only a little. He was cold and wet – and his car was ruined. It had been beaten and broken and worst of all, drowned.

“Just follow me,” barked Max.

So Horace scooped up Kimi from the water and let her twine herself around his neck again; she hung there motionless, as floppy as a soggy necktie. Tickety and Boo clung on his back as he scrambled up the muddy slope behind the sheepdog.

“This way.” Max led him across the fields. Horace panted after him, until at last they reached a dark farmyard where a lightless farmhouse slept, with a green tractor parked beside it.

“This is my home,” said Max. “I usually guard the farm at night. When I heard the cars, I thought it might be sheep rustlers. I never thought it would be a driving dog!”

“Horace is unique,” said Tickety proudly.

“If only I could drive the tractor, that would be so useful,” mused the sheepdog. “No more endless running behind silly sheep. Was it hard to learn to drive?”

“Not really,” said Horace modestly.

“How did you do it?”

“Well, it was like this...” As they trotted down the farm track, Horace launched into an account of his driving adventures.

By the time he finished, they had left the farmhouse far behind and were walking along the road back into the town. Dawn was breaking and the sky was streaked with lemon-yellow.

“I know where I am now!” exclaimed Horace, as he recognised the park.

“Then I’ll leave you here,” said Max. “See you again when you come to collect your car. And maybe you can give me a driving lesson?”

“Delighted to,” said Horace. Max trotted off.

“Come to collect the car?” repeated Kimi, who had recovered. “With what, exactly? A fishing rod?”

“I wonder what Mr Hay will do when he finds out,” said Tickety with interest.

Boo giggled. “He’ll be as mad as a snake!”

“Ahem.” Kimi glowered at him.

“He’ll be as mad as – as a hedgehog in a balloon shop!”

But gloom descended on Horace. He had forgotten all about Mr Hay, whom he had last seen leaping up and down in his dressing-gown at the end of the drive.

They were nearly home now. Although it was daylight, Horace hoped that everyone was still asleep. Then he could sneak in and pretend to wake up, all surprised, as if he’d never been away. He began to run.

“Watch it!” protested Kimi, dangling from his neck.

But Horace galloped down his street, past the car showroom. There was the red sports car, parked all askew. It was smeared with mud and spattered with grass. The cats were nowhere to be seen.

And then he saw the police car parked outside his house.

He halted with a gasp. “Oh, no! I’m in big trouble.”

“Just drop me off here,” said Kimi. She fell from Horace’s neck and slithered quickly through next door’s letterbox.

Horace’s garage was open. Nobody saw him as he crept in. He could hear raised voices coming from the house.

Tickety and Boo slid from his back as, very gently, he nosed open the kitchen door.

**“HORACE!”**

The room was full of people, some of them in uniform. They all turned to glare at him accusingly.

The hamsters scuttled away into the corner unseen. But Horace was caught.

“Well?” demanded Mr Hay. “Where have you been? And *where is the car?*”

Horace hung his head and whined.

Joshua ran over and put his arms round Horace's neck. "Stop shouting! It's not his fault that someone stole our car. Poor Horace. I bet he's been out chasing those car thieves all night!"

Horace tried to look sad and brave. But Mr Hay snorted.

"Useless dog! Why didn't he bark when the burglars broke in? I didn't see him chasing them when they drove the car away. I expect he was hiding!"

"But look how muddy and tired he is!" Josh argued. "That proves that he must have been trying to track the car thieves down."

"Quite possibly," agreed the policeman. "It's just a shame you didn't see the thieves properly, Mr Hay."

"It was too dark. But I could make out a big, ugly ruffian in the driving seat!" Mr Hay declared.

"Well, he must have been wearing gloves," said the policewoman. "He didn't leave a single fingerprint anywhere in the garage."

"It won't make it easy to find him," said her colleague, "but we'll do our best."

The police officers closed their notebooks. To Horace's great relief, they left without arresting him.

But now everyone ignored him. Josh realised he was late for school and hurried off to pack his bag, forgetting to give Horace any breakfast. Even when Horace shuffled his dog bowl around the kitchen floor, nobody took the hint.

So he wandered into the living-room, where he found a few stray dog biscuits behind the curtain. He lay down to chew them. Tickety and Boo were already back in their cage and snoring loudly.

Horace closed his eyes, but he couldn't sleep.

He felt dreadful. He felt horribly hungry and cold – but worse than that was the guilt.

Nobody knew he had crashed the family's car at the bottom of a ditch, and abandoned it there.

He had to get it back. But how? What was a dog to do?

## Chapter Seven

Horace could think of only one solution.

He would have to lead Mr Hay to the car. Then Mr Hay could arrange to get it out of the stream. He would be so pleased. He'd think that Horace had tracked the car thieves to the farm.

Yes, that would work! It worked for dogs that Horace had seen on TV, anyway. They were always guiding their masters to a climber dangling by one finger from a cliff, or a baby about to fall into a crocodile-infested river.

So Horace leapt up and charged into the bathroom where Mr Hay was shaving. He jumped up on to the toilet seat and whined loudly.

"Go away, you daft dog!" snapped Mr Hay.

"Car, car!" barked Horace. "I'll take you! Take you!"

"Stop it, Horace."

Horace turned up his head and howled. "It's out of toooooown!"

"Be quiet, you hopeless hound! I'm not interested."

Mr Hay pushed him out and shut the door. Horace ran downstairs and tugged at Mrs Hay's sleeve to get her attention.

"Don't you dare bite holes in my best cardigan!" said Mrs Hay, and she pushed him outside.

Horace raced over to Josh, who was just setting off to school. He pounced on Josh's feet so that he had to stop.

"Car! Farm! Farm! Car!" yelped Horace.

"Not now, Horace. I'm late for school." Josh pushed him away and hurried off.

None of the dogs on TV had this problem, Horace thought. Why was it so hard to get the humans to listen?

Maybe he needed a cleverer idea. He trotted into next door's garden and peered through the back window.

On a table he could see an enormous glass tank the size of a bathtub. Inside it, Kimi was draped along a dead branch like a long striped sock.

“Pssst! Kimi!” Horace tapped on the window with his nose.

The snake looked up. Then she raised her head and prised the lid off her tank a fraction. Flowing out through the narrow gap, she sat up on the table.

“What is it?”

“I need help!” yapped Horace. “How can I rescue the car? Think! Think! You’ve got better brains than me.”

“Your car is not my problem.”

“But if I don’t get it back, we’ll never find the desert!”

“Hah! You said we were going to the desert last night. And it was nothing like,” Kimi said reproachfully. “It was far too wet, and full of sheep and tractors.”

“It was—” Horace stopped. “What? Hang on! *Yes!* That’s just given me a brilliant idea. Thank you, thank you!”

“Where are you going?”

Horace did not answer. He had already gone.

However, he did not go home. Instead, he lolloped off down Tintern Lane. As he passed the car showroom, he saw Mr Mordle washing the mud off the red sports car.

“Drratted joy-riders,” grunted Mr Mordle angrily. Catching sight of Horace, he threw a wet sponge at him. Horace yelped as it splashed against his leg.

“Get lost, you mangy mongrel!” Next, Mr Mordle hurled a bucketful of water at Horace, who failed to dodge out of the way in time. He was drenched in soapsuds.

There was the sound of snickering nearby. It was the tabby cat, curled up on a nearby car, and laughing.

“Oh dear, oh dear!” it mocked. “Who’s a soggy doggy then?”



Horace thought about chasing it. Instead, he decided to ignore it and walk on with dignity. He was a dog on a mission.

Anyway, those cats would be laughing on the other side of their furry faces once he got his car back. He would show them!

So he shook himself, sneezed and continued down the road.

He headed out of town, and stopped at the edge of a field to look around.

Which way had he driven last night? It had been so dark that he could not be sure. He thought this was the winding lane he had come down; but where had he turned off onto the track?

Horace ran to and fro, hunting for the bumpy track. Everything looked different by daylight.

So, lifting his nose into the air, he sniffed. A hundred smells were tumbling on the breeze. Sheep and cows, grass and flowers; tarmac, lorries, cars...*His* car...

There it was! He caught the merest whiff of Mr Hay's aftershave and Mrs Hay's handbag and Joshua's football kit, mixed in with oily car smells.

The scent led him down a rutted track. Horace galloped after it, through a broken gate, across a field full of sheep – and all of a sudden he was looking down a muddy slope at a stream.

And there at the bottom was his car. It was battered and extremely dirty.

"Oy, oy!" barked a stern voice. "Stay clear of my sheep – oh, it's you!"

"Max?"

"Horace? Good to see you!" The sheepdog bounded over to him, tail wagging. "Is someone coming to tow your car out now?"

"Yes. Me," said Horace.

Max looked puzzled. "*You?* But how?"

"I just need to borrow your tractor."

"Oh, boy! Can you really drive a tractor?" Max began to run round in excited circles.

“Of course,” said Horace. After all, how hard could it be? Tractors were much slower than cars. They must be a lot easier to control. “Just lead me to it.”

“Yip, yip, yippee! Lucky that Farmer Lott and his wife are away at the market! Wow, I can’t wait. You can teach me to drive it, too!”

The two dogs raced across the fields to the farmyard where the green tractor was parked.

“Here you are,” said Max.

The tractor seemed much bigger than Horace had remembered. Its wheels were enormous. There was no cab. When he jumped up into the seat he felt very high and exposed, like a bird clinging to a treetop.

He stared at the controls. “What are all the different levers for?”

“Well, there are two brakes,” said Max.

“*Two?*”

“Sure. One for the left wheels, one for the right. Didn’t you know that?”

“Yes, of course,” said Horace. “I’d forgotten, that’s all. And just remind me, why are there two gear sticks?”

“I’ve never quite worked that out. But Farmer Lott uses both of them.”

“So how many gears are there?”

“Fifteen, I think,” said Max.

“*Fifteen!*” yelled Horace. “I mean, only fifteen?”

“Isn’t that enough?”

“I’ll make do,” groaned Horace.

Max showed him the button to press to start the engine. At once, it seemed as if the whole world was growling and shuddering beneath him. Perched up on high, Horace felt himself vibrating like a dog-shaped jelly.

He wiggled the gear levers and hoped for the best.

The tractor lurched forward. Horace tried to turn the wheel. It felt like trying to steer an elephant: a very obstinate and clumsy elephant.

“Yikes!” cried Horace, as he knocked over a pile of straw bales.

“Help!” he yapped as he ran over a bucket.

“Erk!” he shrieked as he headed for the corner of the barn.

Tugging wildly at the wheel, he just managed to miss it. Instead, he drove straight through the dung-heap.

Manure splattered in all directions in a spectacular brown fountain. While Horace had nothing against manure, he did not particularly want a shower in it.

“This is hard!” he protested.

“You’re doing fine! Nearly as good as Farmer Lott. He always hits the dung-heap too,” shouted Max over the growling engine. “Watch out for the gate!”

Horace swerved just in time to avoid smashing the gate. The tractor trundled into the field and ploughed headlong across the grass.

He couldn’t seem to slow it down. Every time he wiggled the gear levers, it got faster. Sheep scattered, complaining loudly.

“Try and keep it straight!” yelled Max.

Horace looked behind him. The massive wheels had left a long black trail, as wriggly as a worm.

“Look out!” screamed Max.

Horace looked ahead. He slammed both brakes on, hard. The tractor juddered to a grinding halt at the very edge of the stream.

“Perfect!” said Max. He leapt out with the rope and ran down to the car, where he tied it round the tow bar.

“Now go into reverse. Gently!”

“Reverse,” said Horace, trying the gears in turn. “Hmm. No. Oops!” He just managed to stop in time before the tractor lurched into the stream.

At last he found reverse gear. Gradually, the tractor chugged backwards. And slowly, clanking and creaking on the end of the rope, up came the dripping car.

Horace towed it proudly back across the fields. Even the sheep seemed to be cheering him now. “*Hurraah! Hurraah!*”

He dragged the car through the manure heap and finally reached the farmyard. There he stopped the tractor and jumped down to inspect the damage.

His heart sank. The car was not looking good. There were dents and scratches all over it.

The bonnet was covered with weed, the boot was covered with mud, and the bumpers were caked in manure. Inside it, there was a small pond.

When Horace tried to start its engine, nothing happened. Not even a spark of life.

Max shook his head. “You’ll just have to tow it home,” he said.

“What? How can I do that?” wailed Horace.

“Borrow the tractor. You’ve still got plenty of time. Farmer Lott won’t be back for hours.”

“But I can’t tow the car through town!” wailed Horace. “I can’t drive the tractor in broad daylight!”

“Why not? You did a good job just now.”

“But there was nobody to notice me. If people see me driving a tractor through the town, they’ll go crazy!” Horace howled. “They’ll arrest me! Dogs aren’t allowed to drive. They’ll put me in prison. Oh, why didn’t I think of this? I don’t know what to do-ooo-ooo!”

## Chapter Eight

Horace slumped to the ground and lay there despondently.

“Mr Hay was right,” he moaned. “I’m just a hopeless hound.”

“Never!” said Max stoutly.

“If I only had my helmet and my overalls,” sighed Horace, “people might think I was a racing driver.”

“Wait – that’s a brilliant idea!” barked Max. “A disguise: that’s what you need. Just wait there.”

He bounded into the farmhouse and returned a moment later with something big and yellow flapping in his jaws.

“It’s Farmer Lott’s raincoat,” explained Max. “Try it on!”

He helped Horace pull on the coat, which was stiff and smelt of rubber. Although it covered his body well enough, the hood was too small to go over his nose and ears.

“I need something to disguise my head,” said Horace.

“Hang on!” Max darted back into the house. When he came out again, he was trailing a long, green, floaty cloth behind him.

“One of Mrs Lott’s headscarves,” he panted.

“A what? But I don’t–” Horace’s protest was cut off in mid-sentence. Max had just wrapped the scarf around his jaws. Then he pulled it over Horace’s ears and tied it with a bow.

“There. That covers you up nicely! All I can see are your eyes. And these will disguise your paws,” he added, giving Horace a pair of bright pink rubber gloves.

Horace put them on. They were too big. Five floppy rubber fingers dangled from each paw.

“How do I look?” he mumbled through the scarf.

“Fabulous!” said Max. “Very glamorous. Just like Mrs Lott when she’s all dressed up. We need to get a move on now!” He jumped into the car and sat eagerly in the driver’s seat. “I’m ready to be towed!” he called.

Horace, clumsy in his stiff yellow raincoat, climbed back on the tractor. He started the engine.

Carefully he towed Mr Hay’s car through the straw bales and across the dung-heap; it only hit the corner of the barn with a slight bump. One more little dent didn’t really matter, he decided.

At last Horace reached the end of the farm track. Now that he was on the road, the towing should get easier.

But it didn’t. Behind him, on the end of its rope, the car wove from side to side, occasionally bouncing off a wall. Max stuck his head out of the window and barked at oncoming traffic to warn it to get out of the way.

Cars coming in the other direction had to swerve. Some leapt into the hedge, beeping their horns. Drivers boggled at the yellow figure perched high on the tractor as it trundled along with the flailing car behind it.

Horace was very thankful for his disguise. He hoped that everyone would just think he was Farmer Lott’s wife going on a shopping trip.

When he reached the edge of town, he felt even more conspicuous. Stopping at the traffic lights, he heard a boy yell:

“Hey! Where’s the fancy-dress party?”

What rudeness, thought Horace. Can’t you see that I’m a lady? He stuck his nose in the air and pretended that he couldn’t hear.

At least his disguise was fooling the humans. They thought he was a strange-looking person – it never occurred to them that he could be a dog.

But other dogs were not so easily fooled.

“Look! Look!” woofed a labrador in amazement.

“Wow! Wow!” yapped a fluffy spaniel, until its owner tugged its lead and told it to be quiet.

“Woo hoo!” barked a big black mastiff; and it began to gallop after them.

It was not the only dog to follow them. By the time Horace reached the end of Tintern Lane, he had gathered an excited canine crowd.

“Who?” they barked. “Who? *Who?*”

It was Silverside, the butcher’s dog, who recognised him.

“Horace!” he woofed.

“Hooray for Horace!” squealed Jellybean, the sweetshop dog.

“Top dog!” cried a collie.

“Well done, you hound, sir,” barked an old beagle. Horace glowed with pleasure.

As the tractor approached *Mordle’s Modern Motors*, he saw the three astonished cats sitting bolt upright on the roof of the black car. They were staring in total disbelief.

Horace couldn’t resist. He had to show off his skills. With a flourish of his pink rubber gloves, he changed gear.

One of the flapping gloves caught in the gear lever, and ripped off. There was a horrible grinding noise from the tractor’s engine. It roared like a mad bull and charged across the pavement.

“Whoa! Whoa!” cried Horace, lunging for the brake.

But he had forgotten that there were two brakes. The tractor swerved sharply to the right and hurtled straight at the sports cars.

The cats leapt to their feet in alarm.

“Help!” yelled Horace. He lost his grip on the controls and slipped sideways off his seat. He tumbled from the charging tractor as it headed for the low wall in front of the forecourt.

Landing on the tarmac, he looked up just in time to see the tractor charge into the wall with a mighty crash.

The cats jumped for cover. Bricks flew in all directions.

The tractor juddered to a grumbling halt with its front wheels straddling the ruined wall. It was a mere whisker from the nearest sports car.

“Good parking!” said Max. Jumping out of Horace’s car, he began to untie the tow rope. “Will you drive the tractor back to the farm now?”

“No!” Horace’s teeth were chattering. He was panting with shock. It was all the fault of those stupid rubber gloves.

He pulled off the other glove with his teeth, unwound his scarf from his head, and shook off the yellow raincoat. He’d had enough of driving for one day.

He felt very shaky. It must be all the juddering on top of the tractor.

“Okay,” said Max. “No problem. I’ll just herd Farmer Lott here to come and pick the tractor up.”

“Horace! You did it!” Tickety and Boo were bouncing up and down at the front of the crowd of cheering dogs.

“We came to see what all the barking was about,” said Tickety.

“And then we saw the crash!” cried Boo. “That was brilliant! I loved the way you demolished that wall!”

“Really?” said Horace faintly.

“Better get moving now, though,” advised Tickety. “There are humans coming.”

People were pouring out of every house in Tintern Lane, exclaiming at the sight of the tractor parked half-way through the wall. Its engine was still grumbling. Horace slunk away quietly into the crowd of watching dogs, leaving the pile of clothes behind.

But Boo did not slink away. He nudged Tickety and muttered in her ear.

“You bet!” said Tickety, her eyes brightening. She scampered up the broken wall and climbed nimbly onto the tractor’s giant tyre.

“Hey! Cats!” she called over the chug of the tractor engine. “Tiddly-puss! Little kittykins!”

The cats’ heads turned to gaze at her. Fang snarled.

“Demon? Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” he asked the tabby.

“Sure am,” it answered with a sneer.

Boo ran over to the discarded raincoat. “You can’t catch us!” he jeered. “Clumsy cats! Crummy cats! Cuckoo cats!”



At that, they became crazy cats. All three of them flung themselves at Tickety and Boo.

“Stunt hamsters!” shrieked Boo, as he disappeared down a raincoat sleeve.

“Stunt hamsters!” squealed Tickety, swinging from the tractor’s steering wheel.

Demon leapt after Boo. Fang and the black cat pounced on Tickety and pinned her to the wheel.

Then they opened their mouths and snarled in triumph...

... just as Mr Mordle came running out of the car showroom.

“What in heaven’s name is going on?” he bellowed. “What’s that tractor doing in my forecourt?”

“I’m sure I saw an animal driving it!” exclaimed a woman. “I thought it was a person at first, in a yellow raincoat. But it had a hairy face, and whiskers!”

The manager’s eyes bulged. “An animal? Hey! What are you cats doing there?”

Fang and the black cat sat up, startled, on the tractor seat. On the ground, the yellow raincoat squirmed. Demon wriggled out from underneath it.

Mr Mordle clenched his fists. He grabbed a broom and brandished it at them.

“Animals? *Cats!* Caught in the act!” he yelled, turning scarlet with fury. “Guilty as sin! Just you wait – oh, I’ll get all three of you!”

The cats did not wait to be got. They turned tail and ran.

They were faster than Mr Mordle. He puffed and panted as he lumbered after them. In comparison, the cats raced like furry streaks of lightning down Tintern Lane.

“Bother,” muttered Horace, disappointed. “They’re going to get away!”

Then, suddenly, not far from Horace’s house, all three cats stopped dead. Bristling angrily, they arched their backs and held their tails aloft like warning flags.

Horace peered through the crowd of dogs. He couldn’t see the problem – until there was a baleful hiss. And it did not come from the cats.

The dogs fell silent and drew back.

“Well, well, well! Three niccce fat catsssss.”

Kimi was coiled in the middle of the path. She fixed the cats with a glittering golden eye. They stood as if hypnotised.

“And guesssss what today isss,” Kimi hissed. “It’ss *Tuesssday!*”

Rearing up, she opened her mouth wider than Horace would have believed possible.

The cats screeched and fled.

They ran yowling back down the street with the dogs in pursuit. A furious Mr Mordle was waiting for them.

Horace felt too shattered to join in the chase. He looked gratefully at Kimi.

“Thanks for that,” he said.

“Thankss for what?” she hissed. “I want my lunch! Like I said, it’s *Tuesssday!*” Her eyes gleamed as she stared at Tickety and Boo, doing cartwheels along the pavement.

“Stunt ham—” began Boo, before Horace swiftly scooped up both hamsters in his mouth by the scruff of their necks. He trotted into the house, where he put them down in the living room.

“You’ll be stunt hamburgers if you’re not careful!” he warned them. “Stay out of Kimi’s way until she’s been fed.”

“Okay. That was a brilliant crash!” Boo yawned widely. “Great chase, too. But I’m worn out after all that excitement.”

“I think we’ll go and be nocturnal for a while,” said Tickety.

Soon they were flat out and snoring in their sawdust bed.

Horace draped himself across the sofa. He was worn out too.

The muddy, battered car was still parked down the road. Mr Hay would see it when he walked home from work. What on earth would he say?

Horace had no idea – but he was too tired to worry about it now. Five minutes later, like the hamsters, he was fast asleep.

## Chapter Nine

Past midnight. The house was silent. Almost silent...

In the living room, a hamster's wheel rattled, and there were subdued bangs and smashes from the TV. Tickety and Boo were watching *Truck Wars* with the sound turned down.

Four large feet padded across the kitchen. Horace paused to lick the mutton bone that Mrs Hay had bought him as a treat.

For Horace was back in favour. Mr Hay had been amazed to find his car. The fact that it was covered in large, muddy paw prints puzzled him, until Joshua came up with a reason.

"The thieves must have driven it back here, and then Horace recognised them and chased them off! What a good dog!"

Mr Hay hadn't been totally convinced. However, he couldn't think of any other explanation.

"I suppose something like that must have happened," he said, shrugging. "Mr Mordle was trying to tell me some silly story about cats driving a tractor. But that's just ridiculous!"

Mrs Hay said, "Do you know, I wouldn't be surprised if Mr Mordle knew the car thieves! Why else would he spin such an unlikely story? I never trusted that man."

So nobody guessed the truth. And instead of a scolding, Horace got a bone.

All in all, thought Horace, it had been a good day. There was just one thing he needed to make his happiness complete.

The sweet, heady smell of petrol, oil and rubber ...

He carried his bone into the garage and gazed longingly at the car.

It didn't look quite so bad since Mr Hay had hosed it down. Although it still had several bumps and scratches, once it had dried out properly the engine had started first time.

Quietly opening the driver's door, Horace slid onto the seat.

"We never did reach the desert," said a regretful voice behind him.

Horace glanced in the mirror. “Another day, Kimi,” he promised.

“I’m too full now, anyway. I’d only get car-sick.”

“Have you been fed, then?”

The snake stretched herself out lazily. There was a big bulge half way down her stomach. “A nice fat rat. Your little friends are safe for now.”

Horace frowned. “There’s a lot of noise outside,” he said. “What’s going on?”

He pressed the button to open the garage door.

The noise grew louder. It was a car engine – no, not one, but many engines. Cars were roaring up and down the street outside.

“It’s a bit late at night for that, isn’t it?” said Horace.

A white van rolled past, revving madly. A Landrover mounted the pavement. A cabriolet rocketed down the road.

Horace looked harder. There was something strange about the drivers...

Paws gripped the steering wheels. Hairy faces panted at the windows. Red tongues lolled out of mouths. Over the roaring engines he could hear barks and yelps of glee.

Every single car was being driven by a dog.

Kimi snorted with laughter. “Looks like you’ve started something.”

“Me?”

“Well, who do you think gave them the idea? Soon the town will be full of car-mad dogs all trying to out-race each other.” She rolled her eyes. “And can you imagine the chaos *that* will cause?”

But Horace grinned in happy pride, and punched the air.

“Oh, *yes!*” he barked.

## The End

Read the other books about Horace and his friends!  
The second book in the *Wheeler* series, *Race Night*, and the third book, *Flying Fur*, are free to download from Emma Laybourn’s website at  
[www.megamousebooks.com](http://www.megamousebooks.com).