



**WHEELers No. 2**

**Race Night**

Emma Laybourn

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This book is dedicated to Sam and Charlie, even though they are now too old to read it.

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## Race Night

### Chapter One

Horace was in the dog-house.

True, it was a brand new dog-house. Mr Hay had just built it in the garden.

It had a red roof and HORACE written over the doorway. Inside it was his bean-bag with its comforting smells of toast and old sausage. Kitchen smells.

Unfortunately, it was a long way from the kitchen. Horace was banned from the kitchen after finding a bowl of custard in the fridge.

Mr Hay had bellowed like a blustering bull.

“That dog cannot have the run of the house any longer!” he roared. “It’s not just the paw prints in the custard. It’s the doggy dribble on the breadboard! It’s the dog-biscuits that he steals from the cupboard! It’s the old pizza that he drags out of the bin!”

Horace was most indignant. They were *his* dog-biscuits, weren’t they? He hadn’t stolen them. And Mrs Hay had thrown the pizza away.

Licking up stray breadcrumbs was part of a dog’s job. As for the custard, he’d simply been fascinated by its wobble.

But now he was in the dog-house, shut out from the kitchen.

Shut out from the garage.

Shut out from the car...

No longer could he creep into the garage at night and sit blissfully in the driver’s seat. He was heart-broken.

It was only a few weeks ago that Horace had first borrowed the car keys. With the help of the two hamsters and Kimi, the snake next door, he had set out in Mr Hay’s car. To his joy, he had learnt to drive!

Once the other dogs in the neighbourhood saw Horace at the wheel, they went car-crazy. Now they were all learning to drive too. At dead of night, cars buzzed and beeped around the sleeping streets.

Their human owners did not know the truth. Oh, they wondered at the muddy seats and moaned about the battered bumpers. They grumbled about vandals and joyriders. Some blamed their own teenagers.

It never occurred to them that dogs could learn to drive.

Not just dogs. Cats got in on the act as well.

But not just any old cats...

Right now, as Horace lay in his lonely dog-house in the dark, he could hear the throaty purr of sports cars racing up and down, as if panthers were patrolling the streets. He put his paws over his ears and moaned.

“Drat those cats!”

He knew who was driving: the snooty cats from the car showroom down the road. *Mordle’s Modern Motors* had the fastest, sleekest cars in town.

Horace stuck his head under his beanbag, trying to shut out the glorious snarl of speeding engines. It didn’t work. He whined with jealousy.

“Why do I have to sleep out here?” he whimpered. “Why can’t I be driving too? It’s so unjust. I learnt to drive first! It’s not fair... *Ow!*”

Something had pulled his tail. Leaping to his feet, Horace whirled round indignantly.

“It’s only us,” said Tickety, the hamster, in the doorway of the dog-house.

“Well, Horace? Are you coming?” demanded Boo, her brother, hopping impatiently beside her.

Horace was bewildered. “Coming where?”

“To the Faversaver car park! That’s where it’s all happening!”

“What’s happening?”

“The rally!”

“What rally?”

“Hurry up, Horace!” “Stunt Hamsters for ever!” yelled Tickety and Boo. They scampered to the fence, dived beneath it and were gone.

“Rally?” said Horace. Hurrying out of the dog-house, he put his front paws on the fence to peer over it.

Headlights criss-crossed the sky above the Faversaver supermarket. All the growling engine noises came from that direction.

“A *rally!*” exclaimed Horace. Desperate to see what was going on, he scabbled up on to the wheelie bins and leapt over the fence. Then he galloped after the hamsters towards the supermarket.

At this time of night, its car park was normally dark and deserted. But now headlights were swooping wildly round it. A dozen cars careered across the tarmac, squealing round the corners.

A crowd of dogs stood watching. Tickety and Boo perched on the handle of a shopping trolley, cheering the drivers on.

The drivers were all dogs. A bouncy brown mongrel pulled up nearby in a Mini Cooper and jumped out to check a tyre.

“Is it a race?” asked Horace.

“Just a practice,” replied the mongrel. Then she stared at him. “Hey – aren’t you– you’re...”

“Horace,” said Horace.

“Horace? You’re *the* Horace? The Legendary Horace? Oh, wow!” She began to jump up and down, ears flapping, as if she was on springs. “I’m Ragbag. I saw you drive that tractor. I’m so proud to meet you, Horace! You’re the champ!”

“Am I?”

“Hey, everyone!” she called out. “This is Horace – the very first driving dog! The one who showed us the way!”

At once Horace was surrounded by eager dogs all yapping with delight and trying to lick him.

“It was nothing, really,” he said modestly.

“Can you give us some tips?” they yelped. “How fast can you do nought to sixty?”

“Can you do a handbrake turn?”

“What’s the best car you’ve ever driven?”

“Well, I don’t really know,” Horace began. He didn’t want to tell them that the only car he’d ever driven was Mr Hay’s old banger, which did nought to sixty in about half an hour. And a tractor, which had been even slower...

“Give us a demo!” begged Ragbag. “Here, use my car! It’s not big, but it’s nippy.”

Before he could protest, Horace was hustled into the Mini Cooper.

It certainly wasn’t big. Horace was a long-legged Irish Dane, and didn’t need to stretch to reach the pedals. But the controls looked quite different to those in Mr Hay’s car.

“I don’t know if I should,” he said anxiously.

“Of course you should! And so should we!” squeaked Boo. “We’ll be your crew.” He swung off the shopping trolley handle and landed with a thump on the back seat behind Horace.

“Chocks away!” cried Tickety as she joined him. “Let’s go!”

Horace put his foot down. The Mini shot off, pinning him back in his seat.

It took him a few minutes to get used to it, but soon he was buzzing around the car park like an oversized bumble bee. Ragbag was right: it was a nippy little car.

As the other dogs applauded, Horace puffed his chest out proudly. He really was the champ!

Then, above the Mini’s engine, he heard another noise. If the Mini Cooper buzzed like a bee, this sounded like a hornet. A very large hornet with a bad cold and a worse temper...

Into the car park shot a lean red sports car. It sped right across his path.

“Get out of the way!” barked Horace indignantly.

He recognised the car. It was a Kazlo Burlap, the fastest motor in Mr Mordle’s showroom. There was a cat leaning out of each window: and he knew those cats as well.

White-furred Fang sat behind the wheel. With him was the tabby, Demon.

Demon waved at him. “Hey, Horace! Nice little tin can you’ve got there!” she jeered.

“You call that *driving*? What a useless mutt!” scoffed Fang. “Watch us, and see how it should be done!”

The Burlap screamed round with an immaculate handbrake turn. Then it took off across the car park in a cloud of dust and empty crisp packets that left Horace far behind.

He stamped his foot down with determination. He had just started to chug after the Burlap when it wheeled round again and stopped. Fang stuck his head out of the window.

“That the best you can do?” he called.

“Give me a chance!” cried Horace. “I can go much faster than this!”

“Give you a chance? We’ll give you more than a chance. We’ll give you a challenge!”

“What?”

“This time next week,” purred Fang, “we’ll have a race. Two laps of the car park. We’ll see who’s fastest then!”

A black cat popped up from the footwell.

“We’re the champs and you’re the chumps!” it yelled.

Fang jumped on its head. “Shut up, Pibbles,” he snarled. “Get back down there and do the clutch.”

The Burlap set off again like a fire-cracker.

“Don’t dawdle, dogs!” yelled Demon, as she waved a disdainful paw at them. “Daft dogs! Doo-lally dogs! You’re all barking mad!”

At that, the dogs did indeed go mad. With furious woofs, they began to chase the cats’ car as it revved around the car-park. The Burlap was pursued by a howling, barking, thundering mob. Pandemonium reigned...

Until, all of a sudden, a brilliant searchlight blazed out.

The dogs stopped in their tracks, dazzled. Horace was blinded. What was going on? What were those sirens?

“Wahey! It’s the police!” cried Boo. At once, the cats’ car whizzed away behind the supermarket, out of sight.

But the bewildered dogs stood still for too long. They were trapped. Police cars hemmed them in. Out of the nearest car leapt a pair of police officers and an elderly German Shepherd dog.

“Looks like we’ve got the culprits, Sergeant Baines!” the policeman cried.

“We have indeed, Constable!” said the policewoman. “Caught red-handed – thanks to Justine.” She bent to give the German Shepherd dog a pat.

“Nice work, Justine!” she said. “I would never have believed a dog could drive, if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes. But now we know it’s true. We’ve caught those canine car thieves in the act!”

## Chapter Two

“You’re not the only one in the dog-house now,” said Tickety, as she helped herself to one of Horace’s dog-biscuits.

“It’s every dog in town!” cried Boo, tying a long piece of elastic to the red roof of Horace’s kennel.

“People don’t believe the dogs taught themselves to drive,” explained Tickety. “They don’t think dogs are clever enough.”

“Or hamsters,” said Boo. He tied the other end of the elastic to his ankle.

“They think a criminal gang has been teaching dogs tricks, to get them to steal cars,” said Tickety. “It was on the news.”

“They said everyone must keep their dogs away from cars. *Bungee!*”

Boo threw himself off the dog-house roof. There was a loud twang as the elastic broke.



“Oh, no!” cried Horace, pulling Boo out of his water bowl. “How dreadful! If the dogs aren’t allowed to drive, how can we beat the cats at their challenge?”

Tickety nodded. “They didn’t mention cats. Nobody will keep *them* away from cars.”

“Bet you I can hold my breath for three minutes,” announced Boo. “Stunt hamsters rule!” He dived back into the water bowl.

Horace looked dolefully over at the garage where Mr Hay had locked the car. “Do you suppose I could break in?”

“No,” said Tickety. “Mr Hay’s just bought a new padlock for the garage door. So have half the people on the street. And any car that isn’t in a garage is bristling with alarms.”

“Couldn’t you steal the padlock key?” asked Horace hopefully.

“Mr Hay’s hidden it,” sighed Tickety. “So I’m afraid we’re stuck. We have no car. We can’t meet the cats’ challenge.”

Horace groaned, slumping to the ground in his despair. “They’ll be unbearable! They’ll gloat! And there’s nothing worse than a gloating cat.”

Tickety nodded glumly. “I know. But unless you can think of something, we’ll just have to put up with it.”

With a splash and a splutter, Boo came to the surface of the water bowl. “Two and a half,” he gasped. Horace fished him out.

“I don’t know how to do it,” he said gloomily.

“It’s easy!” declared Boo. “Just take a deep breath and hold your nose—” Tickety grabbed Boo by his stubby tail and dragged him away.

Horace lay and moped. He had no car. The triumphant cats would claim the victory.

He moped all day. He moped all night.

Sometimes he stopped moping to sulk. Sometimes he brooded for a change. Sometimes he howled. Sometimes he just whined and whimpered.

By the next morning, Mr Hay was fed up.

“I’ve had enough of this dog moping!” he snapped. “Josh? Take Horace for a long walk. He needs more exercise.”

Horace whined some more. He didn’t need exercise. He needed wheels!

“Walkies, Horace! Come on, boy! What’s wrong?” Joshua tugged at his lead until Horace had to move.

He plodded along the street behind Josh, tail down, head drooping. Seeing all the padlocked garages added to his misery. To cap it all, they had to walk past *Mordle’s Modern Motors*, with its gleaming sports cars – and its trio of cats sitting smugly on the wall.

“What’s up, boy? Why are you unhappy?” Josh knelt down by the forecourt and gave Horace a big hug. Horace tried to pull away.

“Poor old pudding,” said Josh, tickling his tummy.

“Nooooo!” howled Horace. “Not now!”

“Aaaaaah! The dear little diddums doggie!” came the taunting cry from the cats. “Who’s a poor little pudding, then? Who’s a snivelling softy?”

Horace was frantic to escape. At last he wriggled free from Joshua’s caresses and raced off down the road with the lead trailing behind him.

He ran all the way to the park. Here he slowed to a walk, since there were no cats to taunt him. Instead, there were dozens of other moping dogs being dragged round by their impatient owners.

Horace barked a gloomy greeting at his friends: Silverside, the butcher’s dog, and Jellybean, the fat spaniel from the sweet shop.

Then he noticed Ragbag, the bouncy mongrel from the supermarket rally. She lolloped over eagerly, ears waving in the breeze.

“Hi, Horace! You’ve heard the news?”

Horace nodded sadly. “We’ve no way of getting to the cars. What can we do?”

“I thought *you’d* know,” she said, surprised. “You’re the clever one, Horace. You’re the champ! You’re the one with all the good ideas!”

Before Horace could reply, Joshua ran up. He was panting and breathless.

“Bad dog, Horace!” he scolded. “You mustn’t run away like that. Come here. *Heel!*” He grabbed Horace and tried to make him sit.

Horace twisted away. All the watching dogs thought he was a champ! They mustn’t see Josh treating him like a naughty puppy.

So, pulling free again, he galloped off towards the pond, where toddlers were pushing toy prams and hurling bread at the ducks.

Suddenly Horace pulled up in mid-gallop. *Police!* Not that he minded the police normally – but this was different.

He recognised that policewoman, sitting on a bench to eat her sandwich. And he knew the stern and grizzled German Shepherd dog who lay beside her. Justine.

The police dog looked up. Her eyes narrowed and her lip curled.

“Well, well! Look who it is,” she said, with a snarl. “Horace the canine crook!”

Horace was about to turn and run away, when he remembered he was the champ. All the other dogs were watching, waiting to see what he would do. He couldn’t back off now.

So he began to bark.

“Go! Go! Go! *My park! My park!*”

Sergeant Baines looked up in surprise and put down her sandwich.

“What a noise that dog’s making! Is it yours?” she asked Joshua as he came running up.

“Yes! Sorry! He doesn’t usually bark,” gasped Josh. “Here, boy!”

He reached for Horace’s collar. Horace ducked out of his grasp. With an agile leap, he sprang away.

He sprang too fast. A little girl stood in his path with her toy pram. He was about to knock her over...

No, no! thought Horace. Not that! Champs didn’t bowl toddlers over!

With a huge effort, he managed to twist sideways in mid-air. He missed the toddler by centimetres. Instead, he fell smack into her pram.

The pram began to roll. With Horace struggling to get out, it trundled slowly down the slope into the pond. There it tipped over and deposited Horace into a family of baffled ducks.

The ducks pecked him, screeching quacks of protest. The little girl began to cry. Her mother began to shout.

Sergeant Baines came hurrying over. "Can't you keep that dog under control?"

"Sorry," groaned Josh. "Sorry. He's usually better than this."

"I should hope he is! Because at the moment he's a walking disaster area!"

Horace shook off the ducks. He waded back to shore and sneezed. A slimy wreath of duckweed had draped itself around his head, a slice of soggy bread stuck to his back and a lily pad dangled from one ear.

"Get that dog on a lead!" commanded Sergeant Baines.

"He's a scruffy scoundrel," growled Justine. "I'll be watching *him*."

Josh grabbed Horace's collar. This time, there was no escape. As he was dragged away, the police dog fixed him with a long, suspicious stare.

A dozen other doggy faces were watching too, with their mouths open. Horace could not look at them for shame.

Under their astonished gaze, the champion driver, crowned with duckweed, hung his head and dripped and drooped out of the park.

### Chapter Three

Horace couldn't stop sneezing.

Joshua rubbed him down with an old towel. Feeling guilty, Horace offered him a lick and a handshake.

“Get your muddy paws off,” said Josh huffily. “You got me in trouble again.”

All the same, he took pity on Horace. He persuaded his mum that because of his soaking, Horace needed to stay warm and should sleep inside the house that night.

So Mrs Hay put Horace's beanbag in the hall with strict instructions to Stay There And Be Good!

“Of course,” sneezed Horace.

He couldn't sleep, however. He longed to go and sit in the car. It was his favourite place: he always felt better in the driver's seat. But when he padded down the hall in the middle of the night, he found the kitchen door was locked. He couldn't get into the garage that way.

So Horace padded out again, unhappily. Upstairs, the family was snoring; but faint thumps came from the living room, where Tickety and Boo had their cage.

Horace slunk in to see the hamsters. He thought they might let him watch *Roaring Roadhogs*.

For once, though, the TV wasn't on. Horace tripped over a tangle of elastic on the floor.

“Ow! Ow!” he yapped as he sprawled across the carpet.

“Ow! Ow!” he cried again, as he landed on Joshua's construction bricks. They were scattered everywhere. Some had been made into toy trucks, and others into towers and bridges.

“Watch out!” said Tickety. “You’re trampling all over our Titanic Trucks assault course.” She was busy winding something long and pink round Boo’s left hind leg, until it looked like a sausage.

“What are you doing?” asked Horace, sitting up gingerly amidst the bricks.

“Putting a plaster on Boo’s knee,” she said. “He sprained it.”

“Poor Boo!” said Horace. “Was it the assault course?”

“Bungee jumping off the bookcase,” said Boo faintly. “I must have measured the elastic wrong.”

“Well, anybody could have worked *that* out!” came a hiss from underneath the sofa.

Horace bent down and peered beneath it. All he could see was a striped shadow with glittering golden eyes.

“Kimi? How did you get in?”

“There’s a hole in your floorboards,” said the snake as she glided out like a long, lithe ribbon. “Did you use the proper formula for that elastic, Boo?”

“Formula?”

“ $Mg(l + d) = \frac{1}{2} kd \text{ squared.}$ ”

Boo scratched his head. “I thought formula was baby milk.”

“You’re lucky you didn’t break your neck!” tutted Kimi. “That elastic’s far too long.”

“How do you know all this?” asked Horace, impressed.

The snake rolled her eyes. “It’s basic engineering.”

“Did you come over just to give us a maths lesson?” demanded Tickety.

“No. It’s *Tuesssday!*” Kimi hissed.

“Oh! Your feeding day,” said Horace, remembering that Kimi only ate one meal a week.

“But my stupid humans have gone out without feeding me!” complained the snake. “I was hoping there might be some dead mice in your fridge.”

“We don’t keep mice in our fridge,” said Horace.

“Anything, then,” snapped Kimi. “Rats! Chicken! Steak! I’m *hungry.*”

“Sorry. They’ve locked the kitchen.”

“I could find a way in. I can find a way in anywhere. I need food! Beef! Rabbit! *Hamster!*”

“Don’t look at *us*,” said Boo.

But Kimi was staring at Tickety and Boo with avid eyes. “I’m *sssstarving*. I can’t help it.”

“Yes, you can!” urged Tickety. “Don’t think about food. Think of something else. Think of... snowdrops.”

“Snowdrops,” said Kimi dreamily, “with a fat little hamster curled up underneath them.” She began to sway with a hypnotic motion. “Come to me, my little rotund friends...”

“*What? Whoa!*” Horace barked a warning. He leapt up and promptly fell over in a tangle of bungee elastic.

Kimi swayed closer to the hamsters, her forked tongue stabbing the air. “Oh, come to Kimi, plumptious little pals!”

“Run, Boo, run!” cried Tickety as she scampered to the bookcase.

“I can’t run!” Boo squealed. “I’ve got a leg in plaster!”

Tickety flung herself at Boo and dumped him on to a toy truck. She gave it a shove so that it shot across the carpet. Kimi rippled after it, flowing as fast as a stream in flood.

“Whee!” cried Boo. “I’m a Titanic Truck!”

Horace managed to pull free from the elastic. He leapt across the room and, just before the snake reached Boo, clapped a paw down on her.

“Let me go! I’m *famishhhhed!*” hissed Kimi, pinned to the carpet. “I’ve got to eat!”

“If you leave Tickety and Boo alone, I’ll find a box of chocolates for you.”

“Are any of them mouse flavoured?” asked Kimi sulkily.

“I don’t know,” said Horace. “Try them and see.” He dragged a box of Mrs Hay’s chocolates from their hiding place underneath the dresser.

As soon as he nosed open the lid, Kimi dived into the box. She promptly swallowed three truffles and a caramel, one after another.

“Aaah,” she sighed. “They’re *nicce*.” And she sank her fangs into a strawberry surprise.

“That was fun!” cried Boo from the toy truck. “Push me again, Tickety. Faster this time!”

“It won’t go any faster,” said Tickety.

“Use the elastic as a catapult,” said Kimi with her mouth full.

“Good idea,” said Tickety. She looped the elastic round the truck and tied the ends to the sofa leg. “Give me a hand, Horace!”

Horace helped her pull the truck back. The elastic tightened, until suddenly the truck – with Boo perched on it – leapt away.

It shot back into the sofa with a WHUNK. Two tyres and a hamster flew through the air.

Boo bounced along the carpet. “*Ooh! Ow! Ow! Ooh! Cool,*” he said. “I must have gone at a hundred miles an hour!”

“At least,” said Tickety. “Horace? What’s the matter?”

For Horace stood rigid, nose quivering, tail aloft like a flag.

“I’ve had a brainwave,” he announced.

“Does it hurt?” said Kimi.

Horace ignored her. “A hundred miles an hour – that’s our answer! That’s how we’ll beat the cats! Can we build a truck that’s big enough for *me*?”

“It’ll never work,” said Kimi from inside the chocolate box.

Tickety wrinkled her nose. “Why not? We’ve got loads of bricks and wheels.” She tipped all the remaining bricks out onto the carpet and plunged into the pile.

Horace and Boo joined her. Kimi was too busy investigating chocolates.

A little later, they sat back to survey their work.

They had managed to build something, but it didn’t look much like a truck. It looked like a knobby raft balancing on a dozen tiny rubber wheels.



“Try it out!” said Tickety. Horace stepped cautiously onto the raft. It creaked and cracked.

“Now for the elastic.” Tickety tied the elastic to the sofa leg and tried to pull.

“Help us, Kimi!”

“I feel sick,” complained the snake, curled up in the chocolate box. Tickety and Boo tugged at the elastic. The cart creaked ominously.

“Now lets—”

**PER-TWANG** went the elastic. The cart disintegrated, throwing Horace off and spraying several thousand tiny plastic bricks around the room.

Horace collided with the dresser, which wobbled for a long moment until it gradually keeled over with a crash.

“Told you it wouldn’t work,” gasped Kimi, writhing strangely, before she was sick on the carpet.

Footsteps thudded down the stairs. The door was flung open.

“What – on – earth!” bellowed Mr Hay.

Kimi rolled out of sight beneath the sofa. Tickety and Boo fled behind it.

Mr Hay glared around at the muddle of bricks, elastic, chocolate wrappers and snake sick. His eyes fixed on Horace’s paws sticking out from under the dresser.

“*Horace!*” he thundered.

A growl came from underneath the dresser. Mr Hay shook his head, baffled, convinced he was hearing things.

For his crazy dog was roaring.

“**VROOM! VROOM! VROOM!**”

## Chapter Four

“Vroom, vroom,” chanted Horace. He was back in the dog-house – but now he didn’t care.

Because now he had Hope. He had a Plan.

And he had seven metres of strong elastic which he had borrowed from Mrs Hay’s sewing-basket.

It was plain that he couldn’t make a full-sized car out of construction bricks. None the less, he was sure he would find a way to go at a hundred miles an hour.

“Vroom, vroom,” Horace growled as he potted around the garden looking for things he could use to build his car.

There were a few house bricks lying by the wall. He piled them, one by one, behind the garden shed. He added some old roof tiles that had been dumped behind the compost heap, and the biggest stones from the rockery that he could carry.

The shed door was open a crack. Horace pushed it wider until he could squeeze inside.

This was more like it! He carried out several lengths of wood and added them to his pile. There were some tools there which might come in handy too: hammers, saws and screwdrivers.

But he still needed the most important thing of all. *Wheels.*

Remembering how he had trundled into the pond in the toddler’s toy pram, Horace had another brainwave.

Hadn’t Mrs Hay stowed all Josh’s old baby things in here last year? He sniffed carefully around the shed, hunting for a baby-Josh scent. Tracking it down, he rummaged in the darkest, cobwebbiest corner.

There it was! His heart leapt like a happy grasshopper.

“Treasure!” he barked joyfully.

It was an old, rusty baby buggy. Horace blew the dust off it, along with a few spiders. Then, taking the handle carefully in his teeth, he dragged it out to add to his hoard.

Now he had his wheels! It was time to build the car.

First, Horace piled bricks and stones onto the buggy. It was quite hard to keep them in place.

Perhaps a roof would help. He laid short planks of wood on top of them for roof beams, and covered them with the old tiles. All the best roofs had tiles.

Finally his car was built. Horace tied one end of the elastic round the buggy handle.

“Not bad,” he said, before he realised that there was nowhere to sit inside his car.

It was a solid pile of bricks. He would have to sit on the roof.

But the roof was quite high. It was too high for him to jump on to, and he couldn't climb up on it without pulling the whole thing over.

“Hmm,” said Horace. After some thought, he scrambled up into the apple tree overhead, and wriggled as far as he dared along the lowest branch.

Then, taking a deep breath, he dived.

He landed on his stomach on the roof of his new car. After nearly sliding straight off again, he gradually got his balance.

“Excellent!” said Horace, sitting up on top of his new car.

“What'ssss excccellent?” hissed a voice from a heap of dead leaves. Kimi stuck her striped head out. She stared at the car, before the rest of her followed.

“What in heaven's name is that?” she demanded.

“My new car. What do you think?”

“I think it looks like a pile of bricks on top of an old buggy. It'll never go.”

“Yes, it will!” barked Horace. “Just pull on that elastic, will you?”

“Pull on...?” Kimi looked incredulous. “You want me to pull that car? It must weigh a ton. You'd need an elephant to shift it!”

“Oh! Really?” Horace drooped. “I never thought of that.”

“Elementary physics,” said Kimi. “Either an elephant, or an engine.”

“Please, Kimi! Won’t you help me make my car go? Then I can drive you to the desert,” promised Horace. “You wanted to go there, after all.”

“We never found the desert last time,” grumbled Kimi. “You drove the wrong way. Still... Hang on there a minute.” She took the loose end of the elastic in her mouth and disappeared into the garden shed.

“I suppose I’d better start again,” sighed Horace. “I’ll just jump down.” Peering at the ground, he wobbled dangerously. “Oh, help. I’m an awfully long way up! *Kimi!*”

Kimi did not reply. Inside the shed, something roared. The elastic tied to Horace’s car began to slowly stretch.

The shed door flew open. The lawnmower shot out, with Kimi twined round its handle, and raced across the lawn.

“Hold on!” she shrieked. “You’ll move any second now!”

The elastic tightened. A brick tumbled off the back of Horace’s car.

“Here we go,” he yelled. “Let’s hit the road – aargh!”

The buggy took off. It left all the bricks behind. They seemed to hover in the air for a while with Horace teetering on top – and then they collapsed in a thunderous, painful heap. Horace rolled over, shedding bricks, and sat up.

The lawnmower had mown one neat stripe across the lawn, and was now mowing a less neat stripe across the flowerbeds, flinging out a shower of buds and leaves.

“Whoa!” shouted Horace, as shredded marigolds rained down on him.

“Slow down there, Kimi!”

“It’s out of control!” wailed Kimi, clinging to the handle like a piece of wet string.

Having mangled the marigolds and pulverised the petunias, the lawnmower headed for Mr Hay’s lettuces. Salad scattered everywhere like green confetti.

After it had finished laying waste the lettuces, the lawnmower tried to mow the apple tree.

This was a step too far. It toppled over on its back, blades whirring, whining like a giant bluebottle. Horace galloped over to it and switched it off.

“Are you all right, Kimi?”

“No!” wailed the snake. “It’s too bumpy and it stinks of petrol. I feel sick!”

“You *can* ’t,” said Horace. “Being car-sick is one thing, but *nobody* gets lawnmower-sick.”

“I do,” moaned Kimi.

“Well, just try and–” Horace broke off as the back door to the kitchen rattled. Mr Hay! He was going to be in trouble, yet again. Big trouble. He seized Kimi in his mouth and ran.

Just in time...

Mr Hay strode out and stood in the middle of the garden, hands on hips. He frowned at his petunias and glared at the lettuce beds. At the sight of the lawnmower, he snorted like a steam engine.

“Horace!” he bellowed. He looked in the dog-house. It was empty.

He hunted in the bushes. No Horace.

He peered into the shed. No dog there either.

Mr Hay snorted again. Then he picked up the lawnmower, flung it in the shed, and stamped inside.

A minute later, the compost heap began to tremble. It quivered and shook and then erupted. Horace’s head burst out of the top in a volcano of old potato peelings.

“I think we got away with it,” he said.

Kimi emerged next to him. She shook away a brown banana skin. “Now I feel *really* sick!” she moaned. “That’s the last time I help you out.”

“I won’t need any more help, thanks,” said Horace, grinning broadly. “I’ve just had the best idea of the lot! I don’t know why I didn’t think of it before.”

“Not more elastic?” Kimi groaned.

“Nope.”

“A concrete car?”

“No! I’m going to make a *real* car with a *real* engine,” vowed Horace.

“Where are you going to get an engine?” Kimi asked.

“Easy! You’ve just shown me. A lawnmower!”

## Chapter Five

“One problem,” said Tickety. “No, actually, many problems. First, that lawnmower has no seat. Secondly, it has no brakes. Thirdly, it has no steering. And it has a top speed of seven miles an hour.”

“A catapult car would be so much quicker,” said Boo wistfully. “I’ve even got a proper bungee rope now!”

Horace shook his head impatiently. “No, no, no. I won’t need elastic. And I don’t mean *this* lawnmower. I mean the sort with four wheels, the big ones that you can sit on.”

“Where are you going to get one of those?”

“Some of the houses with big gardens must have them,” Horace pointed out. “I’m going to ask around. In fact, I’ll do it now.”

He bounded away through the streets, sniffing longingly at parked and padlocked cars, until, down by the shops, he found his friends.

Silverside and a bunch of other dogs were lounging outside the butcher’s shop. As soon as Horace enquired about sit-on lawnmowers, Ragbag’s ears pricked up.

“We’ve got one of those,” she said. “My human keeps it under a tarpaulin in the back garden. But I don’t know how I’d get the key from inside the house.”

“Leave that to me!” Horace glanced around and lowered his voice. “I know a burglar.”

“A real burglar?” woofed Silverside.

“She’s a snake. She can get in anywhere, through the tiniest of holes. She’ll be—”

“Sssh!” Ragbag nudged him. A large, grizzled German Shepherd dog had just strolled round the corner.

“Oh, heck! It’s that police dog, Justine,” muttered Ragbag. “Act natural.”

“Um, absolutely spiffing day today, what?” said Horace loudly.

“Tophole, old fruit,” said Silverside.

“Hark! I hear a pair of blackbirds tweeting,” said Ragbag.

“Hark! I hear a bunch of pooches plotting,” snarled Justine. “Now I wonder what *that* could be about?”

“Plotting? Us? Certainly not,” said Horace, as Justine sniffed around their legs.

“You smell guilty,” she growled, her eyes narrowing. “So what’s going on?”

Just then there was a mighty screech of tyres. A sports car pulled up at the traffic lights, and the window wound down. The driver and passengers wore hoodies, with the hoods pulled right down to hide their faces.

But there was no concealing their smell.

“Cats!” gasped Horace, as a bone was flung from the window.

Then the car took off again, jumping the red lights.

“Bye-bye little doggies! See you next week!” screamed the cats: and they were gone, leaving only tyre marks and a stench of burnt rubber.

Justine immediately sprang away, barking, and chased the car round the corner. The other dogs looked at each other.

“Those cats are getting worse,” said Ragbag. “Driving in broad daylight!”

“*Little doggies* indeed,” rumbled Silverside. “The cheek.”

“If they win the race, they’re going to be unbearable,” groaned Horace.

“We’ve got to beat them. Ragbag, take me to your lawnmower!”

“Yes sir! Come this way.”

Ragbag led the dogs through several streets and down a driveway, stopping by a bulky shape covered with a blue tarpaulin.

“Here it is.” She pulled the tarpaulin away with her teeth.

“Wow!” said Horace, admiring the shiny sit-on lawnmower. “That is big.”

“Sixteen horsepower,” said Ragbag proudly. “And it’s got a huge grass bucket.”

“Forget the grass bucket. It’s got cruise control!” Horace breathed in deeply. What a wonderful smell of glossy paint and petrol! He couldn’t wait to have a go on this magical machine. “Where’s the key?”

“Look through the letterbox,” said Ragbag. “It’s inside that little cupboard on the wall.”

Horace nosed open the letterbox on the front door to take a look.

“No problem!” he said confidently. “My burglar will steal that in no time. I’ll be back at midnight!”

He galloped home, full of eagerness, and banged on Kimi’s window.

Kimi frowned when he explained what he wanted her to do.

“Why should I steal that key for you?” she demanded. “I don’t believe you’ll ever drive me to the desert. All you’re interested in is racing.”

“But we’ve got to beat those awful cats!” cried Horace.

“I don’t care about cats,” said Kimi. “Give me a fat little mouse any day. Talking of food... Have you got any more of those chocolates?”

“You ate all Mrs Hay’s,” said Horace. “She thought it was Mr Hay and called him a greedy guzzler. Were they nice?”

“Delicious,” said the snake dreamily. “I’ll tell you what. I’ll steal the key in return for the biggest box of chocolates you can find.”

“Where am I going to get more chocolates?” Horace yelped. “I can’t just walk into a shop and buy them!”

Kimi shrugged. “No chocolates, no deal.” And she glided haughtily back to her glass tank.

Horace pondered. There was only one solution that he could see. He trotted off to the Faversaver supermarket.

He felt very unhappy about this. Borrowing a lawnmower was one thing; stealing chocolates was quite another. But it had to be done if he was going to defeat the cats.

There was a security guard at the entrance to the supermarket. Horace waited until his back was turned, and then dived into the store.



A thousand wonderful smells hit him all at once. Barmcakes, biscuits, bacon, burgers... all his favourites. Horace was enthralled, and bewildered. He put his nose in the air and sniffed deeply.

There it was! A hint of chocolate. Horace lolloped down the aisles and collided with a fat man eating a Mars bar.

“Oy! What’s that dog doing in here?” he bellowed.

“No dogs allowed!” scolded an assistant. Horace turned to bolt and nearly knocked himself out on a shopping trolley. Another trolley ran over his foot.

“Get that dog out of the way!”

Horace yelped and hobbled off. By now, two shop assistants were after him. He ran up one aisle and down the next, weaving between legs and swerving to avoid trolleys.

Half-way up the third aisle, he stopped dead. His nose quivered. He’d found them! Chocolates! Piles and piles of chocolates!

The biggest boxes were on the highest shelf. Horace leapt up, trying to climb the shelves to reach them. Boxes began to slide and tumble.

As he sprang higher, an avalanche of chocolate descended on him.

“*Get that dog!*”

Horace grabbed the biggest box that he could see, and ran for his life. He charged down the aisle – pushed past the queue at the check-out – galloped for the exit – and did a dummy swerve that sent the security guard diving the wrong way.

Then he was out! He was free! He’d done it!

Only then did he see a policewoman bearing down on him. And a very annoyed German Shepherd dog...

“I see you! I’ll get you!” she barked.

Horace sprinted away across the car park with Justine in pursuit and the chocolates in his jaws. They rattled around in the box as he ran.

But he was younger and faster than Justine. He was gaining ground, when suddenly a man pushed a clump of empty shopping trolleys right into his path.

There was no time to stop. Nowhere to go. He would have to jump over them.

Horace took a mighty leap.

He landed in the trolley at the front of the line. The trolley skidded across the car park with Horace clinging to the sides. It rolled in front of a car; and the car swerved into the path of a van.

The van beeped furiously and skidded into the bumper of another car. The other car reversed and blocked three more.

Within half a minute, the car park was full of beeping, bumping cars with angry, shouting owners. Sergeant Baines was trying to calm them down. Justine hurried to her aid.

Meanwhile Horace's trolley rolled to a standstill at the edge of the car park. With a very battered chocolate box still gripped between his teeth, he leapt over the wall and ran straight home.

## Chapter Six

"These chocolates are covered in tooth marks!" complained Kimi.

All the same, she insisted on eating half of them before she left the house with Horace at midnight. With the snake draped around his neck, and two hamsters hanging on his ears, Horace cantered down the silent streets to Ragbag's house. Boo was out of plaster now, and swung from ear to ear pretending to be Tarzan.

Ragbag was waiting for them. "The humans are asleep," she whispered. "Have you got your burglar?"

“Here she is.” Once he had posted Kimi, Horace was on tenterhooks until the snake emerged through the letterbox with the key in her mouth.

“Easy peasy,” she sniffed.

Ragbag pulled the tarpaulin away from the lawnmower. Then she dragged a wooden clothes airer out of the porch.

“I’d thought we could leave this in the lawnmower’s place,” she said, “with the tarpaulin draped over it. Then my human won’t realise that it’s missing.”

“Excellent idea!” Horace put the key in the lawnmower’s ignition and started up the engine. When he wriggled onto the seat, it felt like a smaller version of the tractor he had driven after his car ended up in a stream.

“Welcome to the Houndmobile!” he announced joyfully. “All aboard!”

After pulling the tarpaulin over the clothes airer, Ragbag and Silverside squeezed onto the lawnmower’s seat next to him. Tickety and Boo sat on his shoulder, while Kimi curled up in the grass box.

Horace drove the lawnmower sedately down the drive. Compared to the tractor, this was easy. Once he was on the road, he opened the throttle.

The result was disappointing. The lawnmower barely speeded up. It went no faster than a strolling poodle.

“Come on, Horace!” squealed Boo in his ear. “Speed up! Step on the gas!”

Horace tried. The engine coughed and chugged. The lawnmower went from strolling speed to ambling speed.

“*Faster!*”

“That’s as fast as it will go,” said Horace.

“Not good enough!” grumbled Boo. “And it sounds all wrong. It goes Tickety tickety tickety.”

“Hmph!” said Tickety. “I suppose you think it should go BOO.”

“Yep. BOO, and GROWL and RARH like a mad dog,” said Boo.

Silverside growled, deep in his throat.

“Like that!” said Boo. “That sounds much better. Keep it up!”

Silverside kept growling. It was a good, throaty growl. But it did not make the lawnmower go any faster.

“Go go GO!” shouted Boo, jumping up and down in exasperation.

“Did you say sixteen horse power?” snorted Kimi. “More like hamster power. Little fat hamster power, about as fast as a slug.” Boo bit her on the tail.

“Stop that!” scolded Tickety.

“That snake has no manners!” squeaked Boo.

“Squabbling won’t help the lawnmower go any faster,” Tickety said. “What we need is a way to soup it up.”

“Soup it up?” Horace pulled over and stopped. “How do we do that?”

“Bungee ropes!” squealed Boo.

“Bigger wheels,” suggested Silverside.

“We could paint lightning flashes on it,” offered Ragbag.

“And add tail fins,” said Tickety.

“Will they make it go faster?” Horace asked.

There was a strange sound down in the grass box. Kimi was laughing.

“What’s so funny?” Boo demanded.

“I’ll tell you what you need to do,” replied the snake. “Dismantle the engine, bore out the cylinder, and install larger piston rings. Then remove the camshaft and modify the lobes, and finally adjust the main jet of the carburettor to increase the fuel flow.”

“Hang on! Say it more slowly,” Horace begged. “I have to whatsit the thingummy...”

“Oh, and you’ll need to do it in a machine shop with the proper tools,” said Kimi. “Unless you want to ruin the engine.”

The dogs looked at each other. Their ears drooped.

“Maybe we’ll stick with the tail fins,” Horace said.

“And lightning flashes must make it go a bit faster, mustn’t they?” said Ragbag.

“If I keep growling, that should help too,” added Silverside.

“I’ve got loads of bungee ropes,” said Boo.

“Right,” said Horace. “That’s the way to go!”

His spirits lifted as he set off again at top speed. True, top speed wasn’t very high; but with all those improvements, by next week the lawnmower would go much faster.

“Let’s go to the Faversaver car park now and practise,” he suggested.

The dogs woofed agreement. With Silverside growling as loudly as he could, they chugged off to the supermarket.

But there they found that others had the same idea. As they approached, they could hear the roar and scream of revving engines.

Ragbag jumped down and ran ahead, then came back to report.

“Those cats are already practising in their sports cars!”

“Then we won’t,” decided Horace. “We don’t want to show our hand too early. We want to surprise them with the souped-up Houndmobile at the race night next week.”

There was the noise of a snake snickering. “You’ll surprise them all right,” Kimi muttered.

“But *they* won’t surprise *us*! We’ll sneak up now and spy on them,” declared Horace. “We’ll discover their tactics and their secrets.”

He parked the lawnmower round a corner, jumped down and prowled cautiously towards the supermarket. Running under the cover of the low wall that surrounded the car park, he stuck his head up behind a bollard.

He had to duck back down in a hurry. A sports car sped past so quickly that the wind from it ruffled his fur.

The car screeched to a stop. A cat stuck its head out of the window. It was Fang.

“Eighty-one miles per hour!” he yelled. “Beat that!”

A few seconds later another car sped past in a blur of noise. This time the wind blew Horace's ears inside out.

The car skidded round in a circle before coming to a halt. "Eighty-five!" shouted Pibbles, the black cat in the driver's seat.

"Those cats are good!" Kimi said admiringly.

"No, they're not," growled Boo. "They're puffed-up big-headed show-offs. We're going to teach them a lesson they'll never forget!"

"Of course you are," said Kimi. "I think you need to aim for at least ninety miles an hour in your Houndmobile."

Horace felt a shiver of anxiety. He had never driven that fast. Would he be able to control the lawnmower at those speeds?

"I know what we should do," squealed Boo. "We should sabotage them!"

"What?"

"We should blow up those mangy cats and their stinky cars," said Boo. "Or at the very least we should bite their brake cables so that they all crash horribly."

Tickety gave him a stern look. "Sometimes I wonder about you, dear little brother," she said. "We are not biting any brake cables. That would be very dangerous indeed."

"All right," said Boo, unabashed. "We could put sugar in the petrol tanks. Bananas in the exhaust. Glue in the engine."

"Certainly not! That would be unsporting," Horace said. "We're going to win this race fairly or not at all."

"Well, in that case there can only be one victor," yawned the snake.

Horace beamed. "That's very supportive of you, Kimi!"

She smiled sweetly. "Not at all."

## Chapter Seven

“*Paint,*” said Horace.

They stood in the back yard of an empty house near the butcher’s shop. Silverside had suggested it would be a good place to hide the lawnmower. There they could work on it in the daytime, with no-one to disturb them.

“Paint,” repeated Tickety. Dipping the brush in a jar of silver paint, she handed it to Horace.

Horace paused. “You’re sure your human won’t mind us painting his lawnmower, Ragbag?”

“Of course not!” she barked. “He’ll have the most beautiful lawnmower in town. And the fastest.”

Horace was convinced. Holding the brush in his mouth, he carefully painted a silver zigzag along the lawnmower’s side. Boo bounced forward with a jar full of red glitter and hurled it at the wet paint.

“That’s more like it,” he said with satisfaction. “Other side!”

Soon the whole lawnmower, including the tyres, was covered in glittery scarlet and silver lightning-strokes.

“Now, how do we make tail-fins?” asked Horace.

“I thought we could paint these pizza cartons silver to match,” said Tickety, “and then stick them to the grass box.”

The pizza cartons were duly painted and stuck on.

Horace stood back to admire his work. “Not bad... but I feel it’s missing something,” he muttered.

“A 250 brake horsepower engine,” said Kimi.

“No, no. Something else.”

“A name!” said Tickety. “It needs a name written on the side! The *Sensational Staggering Houndmobile!*”

“Too long.”

“Just call it the Staggerer,” said Kimi.

Horace stared at his car, perplexed. “There’s nowhere left to paint a name. I don’t want to spoil all the lightning flashes.”

Silverside nodded. “What your car needs is a wall to paint the name on. And it needs a roof to keep you dry.”

“Oh, that’s just what it needs,” said Kimi.

“You think so?” Horace asked.

She rolled her eyes. “Why not just stick your dog-house on the top?”

“Wow!” Horace wagged his tail delightedly. “What a brilliant idea! Thank you! I’ll go and fetch my dog-house right this minute. Silverside, you’re strong: you come and help.”

So the two dogs trotted off to the Hays’ house and through the side gate into the garden.

“There it is,” said Horace.

“Nice dog-house,” said Silverside, scratching his ear, “but how are we going to get it back across town?”

“I’ve already thought of that!” Horace ran to the porch and came back with Joshua’s skateboard. “Help me lift the dog-house onto this,” he panted.

The dog-house was not fixed to the ground. Between them, they were able to lift it up and balance it, rather precariously, on the skateboard.

“You’d better walk on one side,” suggested Horace, “and I’ll walk on the other.”

In this way, with one dog leaning on each side, they kept the dog-house upright on the skateboard as they rolled it along. People stopped and pointed, smiling at the sight of a dog-house trundling through the streets.

“They’re admiring it,” said Horace proudly. “This is going to look so good on top of the lawnmower! Really amazing and – *uh-oh!*”

Across the road, a large dog turned its grizzled head towards them. Justine...

“Keep going,” Horace muttered to Silverside.

But the police dog had already spotted them. She walked stiffly across the road and blocked their way.



“Where are you going with that?” she demanded.

“It’s mine,” Horace said with dignity. “I’m not stealing it. Look, it’s got my name on it; that proves it.”

“So what are you doing with it?”

“I’m just, er, taking it for a walk,” said Horace.

“You’re taking your *kennel* for a *walk*?”

“We’re in a hurry,” barked Silverside. “We’re on an urgent mission. Let us pass!”

Reluctantly, Justine stood aside. The dog-house trundled on. When Horace glanced back over his shoulder, he saw Justine following with an unfriendly glint in her eye.

“Speed up,” he hissed.

“I can’t go any faster!” puffed Silverside. “This thing’s heavy, and it keeps slipping off the skateboard!”

Horace felt himself grow hot and bothered. He didn’t want to lead Justine to the Houndmobile. It was meant to be a secret.

He had to divert her...

So, when they reached the empty house where the Houndmobile was hidden, he murmured to Silverside, “Don’t go in here! Keep walking to the rose garden.”

“The rose garden?”

“Just do it!”

The rose garden was a tiny park further down the road. It was little more than a square of grass with a rose bed in the middle.

Panting, the two dogs pushed the dog-house into the park. “We’ll stay here for a while until she’s gone,” said Horace.

But Justine stood in the gateway and stared at them. Horace began to roll the dog-house round the rose bed. After one circuit, she was still there: so he did a second circuit. And a third.

“I’m getting dizzy,” complained Silverside.

“Keep going!” said Horace. “She’ll be tired of watching soon. Then she’ll go away.”

Justine did not go away. She lay down on the grass and kept gazing at them.

“How long do we have to keep this up for?” asked Silverside, as they circled the rose bed for the eighth time.

“Ssh! Don’t stop!”

“I can’t go on,” said Silverside as they went round for the fifteenth time. He sat down, panting for breath. The dog-house came to a halt.

Justine got to her feet and walked towards them. She bared her teeth in a warning snarl—

—and then jumped backwards in surprise. Something black and white had flashed across the grass in front of her, before disappearing into the hedge.

“What was that?” she barked. “It looked like a snake!”

A head poked out of the leaves. A forked tongue stuck out at Justine.

“Do you mean me?”

Justine began to woof a loud alarm. “*Snake! Snake!* Everybody out. Clear the area! It might be poisonous!”

“I might indeed,” said Kimi. She crept out of the hedge and advanced on Justine. “If I bite you, you might turn orange and swell up like a giant pumpkin.”

And she struck out at Justine. Her fangs just missed the police dog’s nose.

Justine yelped in horror. Spinning round, she ran out of the rose garden as if there was a crocodile clamped to her tail. They heard her barking all the way down the road.

“*Deadly snake! Keep clear! Evacuate the area!*”

Silverside backed away from Kimi. “Don’t swell me up like a pumpkin,” he begged.

“Oh, come on,” said Kimi. “Do I look poisonous? I’m a king snake. We’re known for our charming and delightful natures.”

“You arrived in the nick of time!” said Horace gratefully. “How can I ever thank you?”

“Chocolate,” said Kimi longingly.

“*More* chocolate?”

“You’d still be running round the rose bed if I hadn’t come looking for you. Hadn’t you better hurry up and move that thing before Justine comes back?”

Horace saw the sense in that. So he and Silverside carefully shuffled the dog-house out of the park and over to the deserted back-yard, well out of sight.

There, it took all three dogs to lift it on to the lawnmower.

“It’s a bit wobbly,” said Ragbag doubtfully.

“I’ll tie it on with my bungee ropes,” said Boo.

“And I’ll finish painting it,” said Horace. He paused. “There’s just one thing worrying me a tiny bit. Even with all our improvements, will sixteen horse-power be enough?”

Kimi smiled. “Oh, bound to be,” she said smoothly. “I’ve worked out that your Houndmobile must be at least sixty-four thousand hamster-power. Probably slightly more.”

“Wow!” gasped Tickety.

“Yay! Hamster Power!” Boo did a cartwheel.

“Well, that’s wonderful,” said Horace, much reassured. “In that case, we’ll have no trouble against those cats. Roll on race night! Because what are we going to do?”

All his four-legged friends replied in chorus.

“*We’re going to win! Win! Win!*”

## Chapter Eight

The evening of the cats' challenge arrived. Horace lay in the garden, as tense as one of Boo's bungee ropes, waiting for the household to go to bed. Luckily, nobody had yet noticed that his doghouse was missing.

Soon after the last light went out upstairs, scuffling sounds came from the wall under the window. There were whispers from the drain outlet.

"Stop pushing!"

"I'm not pushing! I'm pulling!"

Tickety and Boo emerged. Boo was dragging a long trail of bungee ropes, while Tickety held a pair of Joshua's swimming goggles.

"If you haven't got a racing helmet, you should at least wear goggles," she told Horace.

"Okey-doke." Horace strapped them on over his nose. "Right. Let's head for the Houndmobile!"

The hamsters hitched a lift on Horace's back as he trotted off. First he went next door, putting his paws up on the windowsill to look for Kimi.

There was no sign of movement in her tank.

"She must be asleep under the sawdust," said Tickety. Horace tapped on the window, but nothing stirred.

"How can she sleep?" cried Boo. "I'm so excited, I've not been able to sleep all day!"

"Never mind. We don't need her," said Horace, although he was disappointed. He had hoped Kimi would come to cheer him on as he won the race.

When they reached the Houndmobile, the other dogs were already waiting eagerly for him. Horace leapt up into the dog-house and started the engine.

"Come on, Silverside! Engine noises," he said.

“Sorry, I forgot.” Silverside began to growl.

“Not so loud,” advised Horace. “We don’t want to go too fast just yet.”

The Houndmobile set off slowly towards the supermarket.

The dog-house still wobbled on its perch on top of the lawnmower, despite being tied on with Boo’s bungee ropes. And Horace found it quite hard to see where he was going, what with the door of the dog-house being rather narrow, and Joshua’s goggles being a little small for him.

He dismissed these minor worries. Those cats were in for a big surprise!

Sure enough, when the Houndmobile chugged into the car park, the crowd of cats arrayed along the wall all stared in disbelief.

Their jaws dropped: their necks craned; their eyes popped.

And then they broke into the most hideous caterwauling Horace had ever heard.

“They must be scared stiff of us!” he decided.

Two cats pointed trembling paws at the Houndmobile and then fell off the wall backwards.

“They’re terrified! They’re shaking at the sight of us!” said Horace joyfully.

“Actually,” said Tickety, “they’re— oh, never mind. Where’s the starting line?”

The starting line was a row of bollards. A crowd of dogs had gathered there to watch from a gallery of shopping trolleys, well away from the hateful cats.

Thirty eager tongues hung out at the sight of the Houndmobile. The dogs drooled.

“Great lightning stripes!” they barked.

“Mega tail-fins!”

“Love the goggles, dude!”

“Way to go! Let’s show those cats who’s boss!”

With some difficulty, Horace lined the lawnmower up by the bollards.

“Who are we racing against?”

No sooner had the words left his mouth than the answer came.

With a roar far louder than any that Silverside could produce, a black Siren Sprinter rolled into the car park. It was as sleek as a shadow. The black cat, wearing sunglasses, lounged in the driver's seat.

From the audience of cats came a cheer.

"Pibbles!" they yelled. "Go, Pibbles!"

Pibbles pushed his sunglasses up and stretched. "Ready to roll, mutt? Two circuits of the supermarket. Marmaduke there will drop the flag on the count of three."

Horace adjusted his goggles and fixed his eyes on the ginger cat holding the flag.

"Get ready to growl for all you're worth, Silverside," he muttered. "One, two—"

There was a black blur beside him as the Siren took off.

"You didn't wait for three!" yelled Horace.

The lawnmower lurched forward. The engine chugged. Silverside growled mightily. Yet the Houndmobile went no faster than a terrier could trot.

"What's wrong with it?" yelped Horace. He opened the throttle as far as it would go, but it made little difference. The doghouse began to slip backwards off the lawnmower. Horace had to clutch it with one paw and try to steer with the other.

Meanwhile the Siren had sped right round the supermarket once and was coming up behind him for the second circuit. It roared past with the cats all yowling encouragement.

"Go, Pibbles, go!"

"We're going to lose!" groaned Horace.

All of a sudden, the Siren's sound changed. The engine note became harsh and high. It screamed and rasped and grated.

White smoke began to seep out from the bonnet. With a grind and crunch of gears, the car stopped dead.

The cats yowled again – this time with horror. Dashing over to the car, Demon yanked the bonnet open. A huge cloud of smoke billowed out and enveloped her.

“Gearbox failure! It’s leaking oil all over the place,” snarled Pibbles, before he began to cough. Soon he too was lost in the smoke.

None of the cats noticed a long, thin ribbon of black and white that crept unobtrusively out of the smoky cloud. It slithered over to Horace and his Houndmobile.

“Keep going!” hissed Kimi. “You can win this!”

“Win! Win! Win!” barked Ragbag, and all the watching dogs joined in.

But Marmaduke the ginger cat leapt in front of the Houndmobile, waving his flag furiously.

“Back to the starting line,” he snapped.

“You’ve got to let us finish the race!” cried Horace. “You’ve broken down. We can keep going!”

“That was just a practice lap,” snarled Marmaduke. “We’ll bring our other car out for the real thing.”

“You never mentioned a practice lap!” protested Horace.

The dogs howled. The cats yowled. But there was nothing else for it. The cats stood in his way, and would not let him drive on.

Glumly Horace steered the Houndmobile back to the line of bollards.

“Here’s our reserve car,” announced Marmaduke. Around the corner rolled a red Siren Sprinter, even sleeker than the first.

“Do you think we can do this?” asked Ragbag doubtfully. Horace took off his goggles and scratched his head.

“I don’t know. I’ll have to drive like I’ve never driven before,” he said.

“We should scrag that car!” squealed Boo. “Rip its tyres off! Paint over its windows! Stuff dandelions into its engine!”

“No chance,” said Kimi. “I’ve done *my* bit. My teeth are still aching from biting through the oil seals.”

“I don’t want any cheating,” Horace told them sternly.

“But then how will we win?” croaked Silverside. “I’m hoarse. I can’t growl any longer!”

“I’ll get all the other dogs to growl,” suggested Ragbag, and she bounded off to tell them.

“We might need to do more than that,” sighed Horace.

Regretfully, he began to unstrap the bungee ropes from the dog-house. He gave them back to Boo, who scampered away with them.

“Give me a hand, Silverside,” said Horace, and he began to lift down the dog-house from the lawnmower. “This keeps slipping. It’s a shame, but we’ll go faster without it. We need to streamline.”

Tickety carefully folded the tail fins back. “There,” she said. “That should help too. Good luck, Horace!”

“Get ready to growl!” barked Ragbag at the audience.

“Get ready to lose!” jeered the cats.

Pibbles was installed in the new red Sprinter. Its engine revved.

Two dozen dogs growled in answer.

And then a deep, stern bark rang out across the car park, louder than any of the other dogs.

“Halt! Just stop right there, you canine criminals! *You’re nicked!*”



## Chapter Nine

Justine marched over and stood, legs firmly apart, in front of the waiting racers.

“You’re under arrest, the lot of you!” she barked. “I’m booking you for speeding, driving without due care and attention, not possessing a licence and taking cars without consent! You’re coming down to the police station right now!”

“Oh no, we’re not,” snarled the cats.

And without warning, the red Siren Sprinter took off like a rocket. It charged straight at Justine.

The police dog hurled herself to one side and rolled across the tarmac. The sports car missed her by a whisker.

“Go, Horace, go now!” shouted Tickety. “Don’t get left behind!”

“But—”

Horace didn’t get the chance to finish. Boo had already jumped on the accelerator. The lawnmower trundled sedately after the Sprinter.

“Faster! Faster!” cried Tickety.

“Faster!” growled all the dogs, making engine noises as loudly as they could.

“It’s working!” said Horace.

Certainly, without the doghouse on top of it, the lawnmower was faster than it had ever been. But it was still not fast enough. The Sprinter was pulling away from them, further and further...

And then it wasn’t.

It was slowing down. It wasn’t smoking this time, or leaking oil, or making grinding noises – but it was definitely slowing down.

And then it stopped altogether.

“Overtake! Overtake!” screamed Tickety, jumping up and down.

Horace pulled alongside the Sprinter. “What are those things attached to its back bumper?” he wondered. “They look a bit like—”

The Sprinter moved again.

It did not go forwards this time. It went backwards. It hurtled like a bullet in reverse.

“—bungee ropes,” finished Horace, an instant before the Sprinter hit the bollards. The black cat leapt clear just in time.

There was an almighty *smash* like a thousand greenhouse windows breaking: and the gasp of a hundred horrified cats.

“Oh, YES!” Boo turned a cartwheel. “What a bang! What a crash! What a smash!”

But Justine clambered to her feet.

“You’re *all* under arrest!” she thundered. Dogs and cats alike cowered at the force of her fury. “You’re under arrest for speeding and smashing and everything else!”

“Hang on,” mewed Pibbles, sprawled on the tarmac. “I wasn’t speeding. I *stopped!* Someone and their elastic *stopped* me!”

“You were speeding *backwards,*” bellowed Justine.

Kimi slid out from the shadows. “Ahem,” she said.

Justine leapt back like a kangaroo. “Deadly snake! Deadly snake!”

“Only to mice,” said Kimi. “I’m so sorry I accidentally struck out at you the other day, Inspector. I thought you were one of those nasty cats. I wouldn’t dream of threatening an officer of the law.”

“*You’re* under arrest too!”

“Excuse *me,* Inspector,” said Kimi silkily. “But Horace wasn’t speeding. You saw him. He can’t have doing more than twelve miles an hour.”

“I was going faster than—” began Horace, before Tickety jumped on his nose.

Justine frowned. “Maybe he wasn’t speeding. But he *was* driving carelessly!”

“No, he wasn’t,” said Kimi. “He didn’t crash. It was Pibbles who crashed.”

“He was driving without a licence!”

“You don’t need a licence for a lawnmower.”

Justine glared at her. “A *stolen* lawnmower!”

“It belongs to me,” piped up Ragbag. “I lent it to him.”

“I think you’ll find that under Paragraph 34, sub-section 2A of the Road Traffic Act of 1988, Horace has done absolutely nothing wrong,” said Kimi. “But of course you’ll know that.”

Justine clenched her jaws. She looked as if she badly wanted to bite something.

Then she whirled round and snapped at the cats. “You lot! Don’t tell me those are *your* cars. You’re all under arrest for speeding, theft and criminal damage!”

She began to line the cowering cats up against the wall to take their names.

Kimi nudged Horace. “Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

“What? I can’t!”

“Why not?”

“I haven’t won the race yet,” protested Horace. “I still have to drive twice round the supermarket to win!”

“Oh, for goodness sake!” said Kimi. “Well, do it quickly. No, no! On second thoughts, do it very, very slowly.”

So Horace climbed back onto the Houndmobile. Boo perched on his shoulder and waved to the crowd of dogs as Horace began, very slowly, very carefully, to drive. With Justine so close by, he dared not go at more than three miles an hour.

The Houndmobile crawled around the supermarket like an exhausted snail. Ragbag and Silverside ran ahead, and then had to stop and sit down while Horace caught them up.

Justine paused in lecturing the cats to watch.

“Very good,” she said approvingly. “At least someone here knows how to drive properly!”

Horace blushed with pride as he began his second circuit. The dogs began to howl “We are the Champions.”

Eventually, he reached the finishing line to a huge barrage of barks and cheers.

“We’ve done it!” declared Horace, as Silverside brought down the chequered flag. “I knew we could! Driving Dogs forever!”

“And High-speed Hamsters!” added Tickety.

“Lap of honour! Go, Horace, go!” yelled Boo.

So with all the dogs cheering him on, and the cats yowling in disgust, Horace proudly began a very slow, sedate and sluggish lap of honour in the Sensational Staggering Houndmobile.

## THE END

Have you read the other books about Horace and his friends? The first book in the *Wheelers* series, *Petrol Paws*, and the third book, *Flying Fur*, are free to download from Emma Laybourn’s website at

[www.megamousebooks.com](http://www.megamousebooks.com)

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