

## Chapter One

‘Leave it – leave it. *Leave it!*’

Ellen struggled to keep control of the jeep as Snorkel scabbled around beneath her legs, trying to extract her ball from the footwell. A moment later, and a white clown’s face looked up between her knees, red ball in mouth, mad blue eyes imploring.

‘Not now, Snork,’ she pleaded.

The ball was dropped lovingly on to her thigh, leaving a trail of wet slobber behind as it rolled down her bare leg and toppled into the footwell once more, settling under the brake pedal.

Having fallen asleep on the passenger seat after her ham sandwich and loo break at Taunton Deane Services two hours earlier, the collie had only just woken up again, and was desperate to have a run-around and play a game. But because they were so close to the end of their journey, Ellen didn’t want to stop.

‘Miaaaaaaaeeeeeeeeooooooooow!’ Fins complained from his wicker basket, redoubling his efforts to escape. He had been trying to chew his way out since setting off from Cornwall, with no loo break and no in-car ball game to break the monotony. The basket on the backseat positively vibrated from inside while at the same time rocking to and fro as Ellen negotiated the narrow, winding lane.

She’d forgotten just how many hairpins and illogical dog-legs there were in the lanes here, all relating to ancient rights of way and field systems that had long since been abandoned in the wake of modern farming. Unlike North Cornwall, with its twisting tunnels of high-banked lanes, the Cotswolds had low stone walls over which she caught regular glimpses of ripening crops and grazing stock, making it easy to lose concentration. Even the woods were different, she noticed, as she dropped down a steep hill into a forest – the trees were tall and proud and let in far less light through their canopy. Compared to the bright sunshine outside, it was like driving into a cool, dark cathedral. She pushed her dark glasses up into her hair.

Snorkel let out a series of frustrated whines as she scratched frantically for her ball. Fins hissed and wailed as he munched at the wicker. To drown the din, Ellen turned on the radio, but the local station she’d tuned into hours earlier had long since faded to white noise. She pressed the scan button to find something else, then realised there was a tape in the deck and flipped it out to see what it was.

It was one of Richard’s old compilations, lovingly put together to set the mood for long drives across Europe in search of surf.

Her eyes misted and she slotted it carefully back in, not pushing hard enough to engage the ‘play’ mechanism. She wasn’t ready to listen to it yet. Nor was she ready for the song that started blasting out of the speakers when the auto-tracker found a station at last. It was Men at Work singing ‘Land Downunder’. Ellen tetchily punched off the power switch.

At that moment, her phone started ringing. As she reached out to grab it from the dashboard, she glanced up at the road just in time to see the sharp right-hand bend appear through the dappled shadows. She was driving way too fast to take it safely, but it was too late to brake, so she was forced to wrench the steering-wheel round, bite her tongue and pray that they didn't hit a tree. With the car on two wheels, they bucketed round, kicking up leaf mulch and dirt from the verge, the back end of the jeep fighting to find any grip. The ringing mobile phone slid along the dash and fell into the passenger-door glovebox. Fins' basket fell on to its side with a furious squawk of protest from its occupant. Snorkel cowered in the footwell, bracing herself against the steering column and inadvertently sitting on the accelerator pedal.

Miraculously the car stayed on the road.

Ellen let out a whoop of exhilaration as they careered around. 'Sorry, guys!'

It was then that she spotted the tiny unmanned level-crossing just ahead. The warning lights were flashing red. The barriers were coming down.

She screamed and punched her foot hard on the brake only to encounter the hard, rubbery resistance of a ball trapped beneath it.

'Bugger, bugger, bugger!' Ellen tried to kick away the ball and kicked Snorkel by mistake.

Yelping and trembling, Snorkel threw up a partly digested ham sandwich on to Ellen's trainer.

'I am not going to die with dog sick on my foot!' Ellen screamed what might have been the last words of her life.

Left with no choice, she grabbed for the handbrake with both hands and hauled it back, immediately putting the car into a lurching, sideways, uncontrolled slide towards the lowering barriers. She closed her eyes and braced herself as the seatbelt punched the air from her lungs.

A moment later, she was aware of an unnerving silence. No wailing cat, whining dog or droning engine, and certainly no super-fast train rattling along the track to wipe her out – just a beep-beep-beep warning from the level-crossing and the ding-ingle jaunty tune of her mobile ringing.

Very cautiously, she opened her eyes. The jeep had come to a halt at an acute angle just a few inches short of the now-closed barriers, its engine stalled.

She wound down her window and took a deep breath of air, grateful to be alive. Outside, it smelt of pine needles and burning rubber. Just audible above the crossing warning and the phone ringing, she could hear wood pigeons purring fatly from a tree far overhead. From the depths of the upturned cat basket, Fins heard it too and managed a greedy if traumatised little hunting call.

Ellen started to laugh.

She reached for the phone, checking that Snorkel was still all right. The blue-eyed collie had her ears glued nervously to the back of her head and was still looking decidedly nauseous, but seemed in one piece, still sitting on the accelerator. Looking back between the front seats as she reached across them, Ellen saw that Fins' basket was now upside down behind the passenger seat, but four little white paws were already thrashing angrily out of four separate holes, so she guessed he hadn't broken anything. He was certainly giving full-blooded cries of protest once more.

'Miaaaaaaaaaeeeeeeeeooooow!' 'Yup?' She took the call.

'Hello? Hello? Ellen, is that you? What *is* that noise?'

Ellen gently shifted the wicker cat basket the right way up, rolling her eyes as she realised who was calling. She might have guessed.

'Hi, Mum.' She lifted the basket on to the back seat once more and slid her finger through the mesh door to give Fins a comforting stroke.

'Where are you?' demanded Jennifer.

Fins glared back at Ellen through his basket's door, shook himself all over as he adjusted to being the right way up again, then took a vicious swipe at her.

'At the railway crossing,' she picked up the roll of kitchen towel that had landed on the floor too and swung back into the driver's seat, 'on the lane that goes past the abbey, you know?' She was very proud that she had found the 'hidden' lane so easily after all these years.

'Why are you going that way?' The line crackled, but there was no mistaking her mother's critical tone, with which Ellen was all-too familiar having lived with it both as daughter and, at one time, as pupil too.

'I didn't want to get stuck in the traffic in Lower Oddford – there's always coachloads of tourists milling about and double-parked hire cars on the bridges.'

'Nonsense. It's never that busy. And it's much quicker that way.'

'Well, I'm here now.' Ellen unrolled a hunk of paper with one hand and reached down to scoop up the regurgitated ham sandwich, watched by two guilty blue eyes. She blew Snorkel a forgiving kiss before carefully putting the unpleasant bundle into the empty plastic wrapper. Then she fished around underfoot to find the ball, struggling to pull it from beneath the brake pedal.

'... always get stuck at the crossing that way,' her mother was saying. 'Your father says the signal that triggers the lights is just outside Addington Junction, so one has to wait ages unless it's an express. Then there's...'

As soon as she'd freed the ball, Ellen was almost flattened by Snorkel, who took this as her cue to leap out of the footwell and start playing again, trying to snap the ball from her hands. 'Get off, you sappy bitch!' She laughed. 'I beg your pardon?' Jennifer demanded archly in her ear.

'Not you, Mum, the dog.'

‘Oh no – you haven’t brought that smelly creature of Richard’s with you?’ Her horror was audible. ‘Why didn’t he take it with him?’

‘To Australia?’

‘Well, it can’t stay in the house.’ She sniffed.

‘She’ll have to.’ Ellen ruffled the tufted ears, which had now sprung forward and were pointing at her jauntily as Snorkel stood bridging the gap between the two front seats, front paws on Ellen’s leg.

‘It must sleep in the old dovecote,’ Jennifer insisted. ‘A dog in the house will put purchasers off. They smell and they’re unhygienic.’

Ellen said nothing, pressing her nose to Snorkel’s soft coat. She still smelt of the sea from her early-morning swim at Treglin Mouth – brackish and salty. A few grains of sand remained trapped between her pads and in the feathers on the backs of her legs. Ellen closed her eyes and breathed deeply, tears worryingly close as she said another silent farewell to her beloved coast.

‘You should really be heading into the village on the Oddford road, you know,’ her mother was lecturing. ‘You have to pick up the keys from Dot, remember? And the Orchard Close estate is on the way if you’d chosen that route.’ Jennifer Jamieson was the sort of woman who drew maps of the supermarket aisles to plan the most efficient route from fresh fruit and veg to Ernest & Julio Gallo.

‘I think I can spare the diesel to detour and pick them up,’ Ellen said patiently.

‘You’re running very late. I told Dot you’d be there in the morning.’

Why was her mother such a worrier? she wondered. She could imagine her in Spain, checking the clocks every ten minutes, subtracting the hour difference, and looking critically at the phone waiting for it to ring.

‘It’s not yet midday.’ She squinted up at the corridor of hot azure sky above the railway track, in the centre of which the sun blistered like a magnifying-glass on an inflatable blue lilo. ‘We set out before seven, but we had to stop for a wee.’

‘We?’

‘It’s a natural bodily function. C’mon, Mum, you’re the biology teacher.’

Jennifer tutted irritably. ‘You know exactly what I mean.

*We* as in, you and . . . who else?’

‘Me and the animals.’

‘The animals and *I*,’ Jennifer corrected automatically. But she was clearly relieved that her daughter hadn’t brought one of her scruffy surfer friends along with her. ‘Pets are such a bind. It’s cruel to drag them from pillar to post. Honestly, Ellen, how you think you’ll be able to go globe-trotting with the responsibility of—  
—’

‘I’ll find them homes,’ Ellen assured her, not wanting to get into this conversation while sharing a car with her beloved charges. ‘We had someone lined up in Cornwall, but it fell through.’

‘Hmmm.’ Jennifer was unimpressed. ‘Well, please do try to restrict any damage they might cause to the cottage. It’s so important to maintain an atmosphere of clean, calm tranquillity.’

‘Miaaaaaaaeeeeeeeeooooooooow!’ Suddenly Fins’ head popped out from one of the holes he’d been chewing, much to his own surprise, it seemed. Wide-eyed with fright, he gazed around the inside of the car, then decided to pull the rest of his body through. But being a distinctly overweight cat, he ended up thrashing around like an overheated health-spa client trying to escape from a steam cabinet.

There was a familiar two-toned toot in the distance. The train was approaching at last. Ellen started winding up the window. ‘Mum, I have to go – I’ll call you from the cottage, okay?’

‘Don’t forget the alarm code. Nine zero zero five three, as in Goose—’

‘No, I won’t.’

‘And make sure Dot gives you the keys to the bunkhouse as well as the cottage.’

‘Yes.’

‘And—’ Her mother’s voice was drowned as a three-carriage train came clattering past. The volume it generated probably wasn’t very great in the scale of things, but because the jeep was almost on the rails, it rattled and shook as though being attacked by a thousand baboons in a wildlife park.

Snorkel started barking excitedly, tail whirling. Fins’ head promptly disappeared back into the basket. Ellen threw the phone back on to the dash and started the engine.