

“Hey, Molan! What’s *this*?” said a voice just outside Molan’s tunnel.

Molan the mole sighed. He was tired. All through the long damp autumn night, he’d been out eating worms. Now it was a bright sunny day: the perfect time for a good sleep.

But Molan knew he had no chance of a good sleep now. Not with Hodgepodge, the hedgehog, at his door.

“Molan!” came the voice. “Come and look at this! Hurry up!”

“I’m just coming Hodgepodge,” yawned Molan as he made his way to the entrance of his tunnel.

“Ugh! It’s so bright!” he exclaimed, screwing his little eyes tightly shut.

“Molan, what do you think of *this*?”

“What is it?” Molan said, sniffing the air. He opened his eyes a little and could just make out a blurry smudge.

“A pile of acorns. A *large* pile!” Hodgepodge replied. Molan was disappointed. He had hoped it might be something he could eat.

“Oh - acorns. Is that all? The squirrels must be gathering them ready for winter.”

“Not so fast, Molan! There’s something fishy here! Do you *see* any squirrels around?”

“I can’t see a thing, Hodgepodge. It’s too bright!”

“Well, there aren’t any. Molan, I suspect these acorns have been *stolen!* Help me hide them in your tunnel, where they’ll be safe. Then we’ll catch the thief!”

“But... shouldn’t we mind our own business?”

“It *is* our business Molan! We must fight crime!”

Molan sighed. He was very fond of Hodgepodge. But the hedgehog was just mad about mysteries and solving crimes. He had even made a sign under the hedge where he lived, which said “The Hedgehog Detective Agency.”

“So - let’s get to work, Molan. Help me shift these acorns!”

Hodgepodge stood back and gave the mole advice while he used his broad, strong front paws to push all the acorns into his tunnel.

“Well done Molan! Now we’ve got the acorns safe, let’s see what clues we can find about the crime.”

Once Hodgepodge had got hold of a mystery, there was no stopping him. Molan followed the eager hedgehog as he bustled along through the leaves. As usual, Hodgepodge had got what he called his ‘detective bag’ with him. This was, in fact, a small leather purse, lost on a footpath by a human. There had once been coins in it - real human coins, which the hedgehog had polished and kept as ornaments on a shelf under the hedge where he lived. Now the bag was filled with all kinds of stuff for use in solving crimes. It was slung across his

shoulders with a piece of string, and bumped against his side as he hurried along.

“The first thing...” Hodgepodge was saying “... is to find out if anyone has seen anything suspicious. We’ll start with Olive Owl. She’s always got her eyes open.”

Olive Owl lived right in the middle of the wood, in a hollow tree. She was a Western Screech Owl from America, who had escaped from a zoo. She had yellow toes, and a way of talking that Molan found quite strange. Unlike most owls, she was usually wide-awake in the daytime. That was because she was probably the world’s nosiest owl, and didn’t want to miss anything that was going on. Any time an animal in the wood had a strange feeling that they were being watched, they would usually find that Olive Owl was on a branch above, staring at them. This was rather frightening for the smaller animals. But Olive Owl made it a rule never to eat any animal in her own wood.

*“Don’t go eating your neighbours,” she always said, “or you won’t have no neighbours to eat!”*

It didn’t take long for Hodgepodge and Molan to find Olive Owl. She was perching on a branch of her tree, staring down.

“Hello Olive!” Hodgepodge called.

Olive Owl’s big eyes opened up wide, like two dinner plates.

“Hey Hodgepodge! Yo, Molan! What’s cookin’, boys?”

“There’s been a crime, Olive.”

“I *knew* it! As soon as I clapped eyes on you! And I’ll swear you’re out looking for clues, Hodge my man?”

“Yes. A heap of acorns has been stolen. Have you seen anything suspicious?”

Olive’s feathers fluffed up, and she wiggled her yellow toes excitedly.

“I *sure* have! There was Fox went right by here, just half an hour ago. I’m always suspicious of that foxy Fox. *A fox in time steals nine*, my momma used to say.”

*Nine what?* Molan wondered. Hodgepodge always told him that owls were wise, and how especially wise an American owl that had escaped from a zoo must be. But the mole could never quite work out the meaning of Olive’s wise sayings.

Hodgepodge shook his head.

“Fox wouldn’t care about acorns.”

Olive Owl looked disappointed.

“I guess you’re right, Hodge – as per usual. You sure are one smart hedgehog!”

Hodgepodge puffed out his chest a little. He always enjoyed talking to Olive Owl. Some of the other animals didn’t show him as much respect.

“Well, have you seen anything else?” he said.

“Hmm. There were some of those rabbits messing about in the middle of the night. Those rabbits are a disgrace to a quiet neighbourhood like this!”

Hodgepodge shook his head again.

“No, rabbits wouldn’t have done it. They never do anything that needs brains.”

Olive Owl hooted with laughter.

“Right on, Hodge my man, as always! Rabbits have brains the size of peas! I should know, I’ve eaten enough of them! Hmm... well, there *was* one other thing! I saw a red squirrel in the wood at dawn. *Red squirrel in the morning, shepherd’s warning*, my momma always said.”

Hodgepodge stroked his chin.

“A *red* squirrel eh? Now we might be on to something. Thanks Olive!”

“That’s cool, Hodge my man! Good luck with the crimebusting. You hang loose there, Molan!”

“Er – thank you Olive,” Molan replied. *Hang loose?* What on earth did she mean?

Hodgepodge moved away. Molan hurried to catch up.

“Has that given you a clue, Hodgepodge?” Molan asked.

“It certainly has!” the detective hedgehog replied. “I’ll explain it to you while we have breakfast. Come on!”

Hodgepodge’s little legs speeded up and the mole stumbled along behind him. Hodgepodge never liked to go for very long without having a meal.

“Ah! Here we are – a lovely heap of leaves Molan! They smell fantastic! Let’s just have a look underneath...”

Hodgepodge burrowed eagerly into the leaves.

“Brilliant! Just as I expected! Lots of worms here, Molan. Tuck in!”

Hodgepodge started to eat heartily. He explained his idea through a mouthful of worms.

“You see, Molan, there are no red squirrels in *our* wood, only grey squirrels. This villainous red squirrel has stolen the acorns, left them secretly where we found them, and plans to come back later and take them off to his own wood.”

“But...” Molan said.

“They can’t be trusted, red squirrels.”

“Can’t they?”

“Of course not. Trouble-makers, all of them!”

Molan privately thought that Hodgepodge might be wrong about red squirrels, but he decided to say nothing. He ate a few worms thoughtfully.

Suddenly, Hodgepodge hissed at him.

“Molan! Ssh! Look over there!”

Molan looked, but the sunshine dazzled him.

“What is it, Hodgepodge?” he whispered. “Something dangerous?”

“The squeaf!”

“What?”

“The squeaf... the thief... the thred squirrel!”

Hodgepodge was too excited to get his words right.

“The red squirrel, Hodgepodge?”

“Yes - he’s on his way back to the pile of acorns! We’ll follow him and catch him in the act!”

“But...”

“Come on!”

The red squirrel didn’t seem to be in any hurry. Hodgepodge and Molan kept out of sight behind tree trunks and bushes as he made his way through the wood. From time to time he would stop and pick up an acorn, flick it up into the air and catch it in his mouth, where he kept it tucked into his cheek.

“You see! He’s after the acorns all right!” Hodgepodge hissed.

After a while, the red squirrel came to the edge of the wood. A big field lay ahead, full of rich, dark soil. It had been ploughed into neat lines by the farmer. In the middle of the field was a scarecrow. A big black crow perched on top of the scarecrow. Beyond the field was another wood.

“What’s the squirrel doing?” whispered Molan.

“He’s stopped at the edge of our wood! Come on!”

Hedgehogs (and moles) can move very quietly when they want to. Hodgepodge crept up right behind the red squirrel without being heard. Then, with a cry of “Grab him Molan!” the hedgehog leapt forward and grasped the red squirrel’s tail.

The red squirrel was very startled. In his surprise, he spat out all the acorns he had tucked into his cheeks.

“Help!” he spluttered, and without looking to see what had grabbed his tail, he started off across the field.

The squirrel was young and strong, and all Hodgepodge could do was to hang on to his tail. He lost his footing and found himself bouncing along like a prickly ball. His detective bag came off his shoulder. He was soon covered in mud, all over.

The poor mole had done his best to grab the squirrel as well, but he was too slow. Now he could only run out into the field behind his friend.

“Stop! Thief!” he called out.

The squirrel, who was afraid that it was a fox who had caught his tail, stopped and turned around when he heard Molan’s cry. He was very surprised to see that it was a hedgehog covered in mud holding on to him.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he said crossly.

“I arrest you in the name of the law!” said Hodgepodge through a mouthful of soil.

“What have I done?”

“Stolen acorns!” said Hodgepodge.

Molan caught up with them, puffing to get his breath back. He had picked up the detective bag.

The crow who had been sitting on the scarecrow flapped over and landed on the ground nearby.

“You can’t *steal* acorns!” said the red squirrel. “They don’t *belong* to anybody!”

“The acorns in our wood belong to our own squirrels,” said Hodgepodge. “That’s the law!”

“Well, it’s a very silly law!” said the red squirrel.

“Ridiculous!” croaked the crow.

“No one asked *you*,” said Hodgepodge crossly to the crow.

“You silly hedgehog!” the red squirrel went on warmly. “What if I made up a law that said it was a crime to grab hold of other people’s tails. Then *you’d* be the one under arrest.”

“Quite right,” agreed the crow.

Hodgepodge turned around to tell the crow again that his opinion was not needed. The red squirrel used the distraction to shake himself free from the detective’s grasp.

“Right!” the squirrel said, scurrying off quickly. “Now go home, you crazy hedgehog!”

“Yes, go home!” croaked the crow, and flapped up into the sky before Hodgepodge could try to arrest *him*.

Molan watched the red squirrel as he hurried away across the field. He lost sight of him even before he got to the trees on the other side.

“Humph!” said Hodgepodge. “Well, at least we’ve saved the big pile of acorns from that thief. He won’t come back in a hurry.”

The detective and his assistant made their way back into the wood. As they approached Molan’s tunnel, they could hear an excited chattering sound. Up ahead was a large crowd of grey squirrels, all talking at once.

Hodgepodge bustled along importantly into the middle of the group. The leader of the squirrels, old Bushtail, was standing on the exact spot where the pile of acorns had been.

“Hello Bushtail!” Hodgepodge said.

“Hello Hodgepodge,” replied the squirrel, looking surprised at the hedgehog’s muddy appearance. “You’re not going to believe what’s happened here. A whole pile of acorns stolen!”

Hodgepodge was puzzled. “How did *you* know this was where the thief had left the acorns?”

“No, no. You don’t understand, Hodgepodge. The acorns were left here by the Nutter family, while they went off to find a good place to bury them.”

Bushtail pointed over at the Nutter family, who looked upset and were surrounded by other squirrels trying to cheer them up.

Just then there was an excited cry from nearby. A squirrel emerged from a hole in the ground.

“They’re right here!” he exclaimed, “In this hole!”

Everyone rushed over to the entrance to Molan's tunnel.

"But this is where Molan lives, isn't it?" said Bushtail. Molan wondered whether he should try to run away. All the squirrels were looking at him.

"Why did Molan take the acorns?" Bushtail asked, speaking slowly. There was a heavy silence. Now all the squirrels had their ears pricked up, waiting for an answer.

Hodgepodge glanced over at the trembling mole before replying.

"It was my idea, not Molan's. We put them there for safe-keeping, Bushtail. We thought they'd been left here by a thief."

All the squirrels looked at Bushtail, to see what he'd say.

Bushtail took a deep breath, and looked stern.

"Well, thank you, I *suppose*," he said. "But perhaps in future you could let us know if you're going to do something helpful? Squirrels prefer to find their acorns exactly where they left them."

Hodgepodge chose to remain silent. The squirrels carried off the acorns into the depths of the wood, chattering loudly. Molan could pick out a few words like "stupid", "interfering" and "hedgehog".

"Well, Molan..." Hodgepodge said, watching the last of the squirrels disappear, "...it was all *their* fault, in my opinion, for leaving those acorns lying around! Anyway, how about some lunch?"