

Molan the mole could hear that it was a windy day up above, in the wood. The bare branches of the trees were rattling, and the dead leaves were scuttling around on the ground. He curled up his toes and snuggled down under his mound of dove's feathers. It was lovely and cosy down where he was, in his tunnel.

"Molan!" came a voice from up above. A familiar voice. Molan groaned quietly to himself.

"Molan! I know you're down there!"

It was Hodgepodge the hedgehog. Molan rubbed his eyes, and made his way slowly up to the entrance to his tunnel.

"Ah - there you are at last! There's something very strange going on, Molan. I need your help."

Molan stretched and yawned. "What is it, Hodgepodge?"

"Come and see for yourself!"

Molan followed the hedgehog through the trees. Hodgepodge had his 'detective bag' with him as usual, filled with useful bits and pieces for use in solving crimes. The wind blew dead leaves into them, and quite a few got stuck to the spines on the hedgehog's back. After a while, he looked like a little ball of leaves himself, moving along the ground.

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Finally, Hodgepodge stopped on the edge of a clearing, behind an old tree stump. He made a sign to the mole that they should be quiet.

“There! Take a look at that!” he hissed.

Molan peered around the edge of the stump. In the clearing there were two animals. One was a magpie, and the other was a badger.

“That’s Milly Magpie and Belinda Badger, isn’t it?” Molan whispered. His eyesight wasn’t very good, and in the daytime everything was so bright.

“Yes,” replied Hodgepodge. “Does anything strike you as strange, Molan?”

“Well - magpies and badgers don’t usually have anything to do with each other.”

“Correct. All the detective training I have given you is beginning to show. This is very suspicious Molan. Something is going on.”

“They might just be having a chat, Hodgepodge.”

“Unlikely, Molan. You understand what magpies are known for, of course?”

“Well - they’re supposed to be thieves. But I don’t think Milly...”

“Molan - Milly is a magpie. Therefore she is a thief. She is probably trying to involve Belinda Badger in some robbery.”

“I think Milly is different, Hodgepodge. I haven’t ever heard of her stealing anything.”

“Once a magpie, always a magpie Molan. We must presume she is guilty unless it is proved otherwise. Quick! Get down!”

The detective and his assistant ducked down behind the tree stump. It seemed that Milly and Belinda had finished their discussion. The badger wandered off into the trees, and the magpie flew away in the opposite direction.

“That’s lucky!” Hodgepodge said. “They didn’t see us. Come on Molan, let’s follow Belinda.”

Belinda Badger moved quite quickly. Hodgepodge and Molan scurried along as fast as they could on their shorter legs to keep her in sight. Eventually she reached a sandy bank right at the edge of the wood. Beyond were fields sloping down into a valley, where the farm was.

Hodgepodge led the way into an old ditch that ran along the edge of the wood.

“We’ll... be... well... hidden... here!” he gasped, out of breath.

Unfortunately it was quite wet and slippery in the ditch. Molan, who liked to keep his fur nice and clean, lost his footing and sank up to his chin in the mud.

“Yuk! Oh... oh, this is horrible!” he exclaimed.

“Molan!” said Hodgepodge crossly. “Be quiet, or she’ll hear us!”

Molan struggled out of the mud as well as he could, and joined Hodgepodge at the edge of the ditch. They could just see the badger’s bottom sticking out of a hole in the ground.

“What’s she looking in there for?” said Molan.

“Ssh! Don’t you know who lives in that hole?”

Molan shook his head.

“That’s Fox’s den. She lives there because there’s a view of the chicken sheds at the farm.”

As they watched, Belinda Badger backed out of the hole, and Fox came out. The two animals started talking excitedly.

Molan strained his ears to hear what they were saying, but the wind carried their voices away.

“Can you hear anything Molan?” muttered Hodgepodge.

“No, Hodgepodge” Molan replied.

“I’m absolutely certain there’s a robbery being planned,” whispered Hodgepodge. “Milly is a magpie, and Fox is also a suspicious character. Belinda Badger might be a criminal mastermind who is disguised as an ordinary badger. What do you think Molan?”

“I think I’d like to go home and have a bath, Hodgepodge,” replied the muddy mole.

After a while, Fox went back into her den, and Belinda Badger set off at a brisk trot into the wood. By the time Hodgepodge and Molan had got out of the ditch, she had vanished.

Hodgepodge was hungry after the morning’s work. He agreed that Molan could go home and clean up, while he went off to search for some tasty worms and grubs.

“I’ll see you later on, Molan. Don’t go back to sleep. I’ll come and get you. If we’re to foil the plans of this criminal gang, we must work fast.”

Molan found it hard to stay awake, once he had cleaned his fur and got cosy and warm again in his little tunnel. The wind was wilder than ever up above, and it was so nice to be underground...

“Molan! Molan! Come up - I’ve made an important discovery!”

Molan made his way unwillingly up to the surface. The hedgehog’s spines were completely covered with leaves again. He was excited.

“Molan! The gang is communicating by whistling! I’ve been listening carefully. There’s a code of long and short whistles, and sometimes there’s a sort of very long whistle that starts high and then goes very low. Come and listen. I think we can work out what it all means!”

Hodgepodge led the way to the middle of the wood, then stopped, holding up a paw.

“Listen, Molan.”

Sure enough, there was a kind of whistling noise in the wood. It came and went on the wind. Sometimes there were a lot of short whistles, sometimes one long whistle. Sometimes silence.

Hodgepodge scabbled about in his detective bag, and brought out a stub of pencil and a scrap of lined paper from a human’s notebook. He started to make rough marks on the paper.

“What are those marks?” said Molan curiously.

“I’m writing down how many long whistles and how many short whistles,” replied Hodgepodge. “Don’t disturb me!”

Molan waited patiently. Hodgepodge covered his whole scrap of paper with marks, on both sides.

“No more room!” he grumbled crossly when it was full. “Never mind - this will be enough for us to work out the secret code, Molan.”

The mole looked doubtfully at the scribbled pencil marks. Hodgepodge ran his paw along them.

“Look - there are several sets of four short whistles. That’s probably the code for *robbery*.”

“Who do you think was doing the whistling?” said Molan.

“Probably Belinda Badger. Let’s go and talk to Olive Owl. She usually sees most things that go on in the wood.”

This was very true. Olive Owl was an unusually nosy owl, and even stayed awake during the daytime so that she didn’t miss anything that might be going on.

The two animals made their way to her tree, a big chestnut tree right in the centre of the wood. They looked upwards.

“I can’t see Olive Owl,” said Hodgepodge.

“What are all those grey things, blowing about?” said Molan.

“I don’t know,” replied the hedgehog.

Molan looked at him in surprise. Hodgepodge usually had an opinion about everything.

“They’re my new net curtains!” came Olive Owl’s drawling American voice from up above. Now Molan could see her, half-hidden behind a branch. “I got the spiders to make them for me. But this ol’ wind just keeps rippin’ ‘em up!”

“What do you need net curtains for Olive?” asked the mole.

“Privacy, Molan. *An Owl’s home is her castle*, I always say.”

Molan thought to himself that Olive didn’t worry so much about other animals’ privacy. She was always flying about the wood, peering down at everyone’s goings-on.

“Olive,” said Hodgepodge, “there’s a mystery.”

“And I’ll bet my bottom dollar Detective Hodgepodge is on the case?”

“Yes. I have reason to suspect that a badger, a fox, and a magpie are planning a robbery. What do you think of that?”

“Well, *thieves of a feather flock together*, I always say, and, of course, *a magpie never changes its spots*.”

“What do you mean?” said Hodgepodge.

“I mean,” said the owl, “you sure are right to be suspicious. Milly Magpie came a flappin’ onto one of the branches of my tree yesterday and asked me if I wanted to join her club.”

“*Club?* So what did you say?” said Hodgepodge.

“I said no thank you, and she just took off in a huff. She flew straight through my new net curtains. That’s the sort of bird *she* is! No respect for people’s property.”

“You’re sure she said *club* and not *gang*?” said Hodgepodge.

“Yes. *Club*.”

“Hmm - a club for thieves and robbers I expect. It’s a good thing you didn’t join, Olive.”

“I don’t join any sort of clubs. I like my independence,” said Olive Owl.

“Well, perhaps you will let us know if you see anything suspicious.”

“Sure thing, Hodge my man! I’ll keep my eyes peeled. ‘*An eye for a tooth and a tooth for an eye*, I always say”.

“Yes, indeed. Come on, Molan” said Hodgepodge. “Let’s go and have a snack.”

Molan followed the hedgehog, puzzling over eyes and teeth. He didn’t understand many of Olive Owl’s sayings, but he supposed they must be very wise.

Hodgepodge was scuttling along quite fast, as usual. He spoke over his shoulder, but the wind carried most of his words away. Molan only heard ‘excellent’, ‘juicy’ and ‘worms’, so no doubt Hodgepodge was talking about food again.

The mole was struggling to keep up with Hodgepodge when suddenly the ground disappeared from beneath their feet. Dead leaves covered everything,

and, in their hurry, they had rushed over the hidden edge of a slope leading down into a dell. They rolled helplessly downwards.

At the bottom it was sheltered from the wind, and full of dry old leaves. When Molan picked himself up, he felt dizzy. Fox, Belinda Badger, and Milly Magpie seemed to be spinning around him. In addition, there were quite a few other animals and birds. There was a heron, a hare, a black and white cat, and various other unlikely companions.

Hodgepodge scrambled to his feet and muttered to Molan, "Get back to back with me Molan, and be ready to defend yourself!"

Molan was terrified. They had stumbled straight into the criminal gang!

The animals in the dell were as surprised as they were. But Belinda Badger approached them with a friendly smile.

"Ah - two *gentlemen!* How perfect. We are a little short of gentlemen."

"What?" said Hodgepodge.

"It's Hodgepodge and Molan, isn't it? How pleased we are to have you with us! How did you hear of our little country dancing club?"

"*What?*" said Hodgepodge, louder.

"Did *you* tell them, Milly?" asked the badger, as the magpie hopped over to join them.

"No. But never mind. Now they're here, we can get started."

"Yes. Excellent! Get into two lines everybody!"

Hodgepodge looked at Molan in a panic. Molan shrugged. All the other animals formed two lines, facing each other.

“Come on, gentlemen!” urged Milly. “And don’t worry about Fox. No one is going to be eaten.”

“Certainly not!” said Fox. “I’m not the sort of animal to eat a dancing partner. Why don’t you line up opposite me, my dear hedgehog?”

In a few minutes time, the helpless Molan and Hodgepodge were jigging around the dell as Belinda Badger called out what moves everyone should make. Molan found it quite enjoyable once he got used to dancing with the heron, who was very tall. But he could see from Hodgepodge’s face that the great detective was not amused.

After the first dance was over, Hodgepodge grabbed Molan by the shoulder and said loudly, “Well Molan, we must get back to that very important job we were doing!”

“Oh dear! Must you go?” said Belinda Badger.

“Unfortunately we must,” said Hodgepodge firmly.

“Well, come along next time gentlemen! We’ll be dancing twice a week!”

Hodgepodge made his way up the steep slope of the dell as fast as his little legs would go. Molan asked Belinda when the next dance would take place, and then followed his friend.

When Hodgepodge had scuttled a good distance away from the dell he stopped, and looked back at Molan. Molan caught up with him. They were beside a fallen tree trunk, whose inside had all rotted away so that it was like a big tube. The wind made a whistling noise as it rushed through the hollow trunk. As it blew stronger or weaker, the sounds came out differently. Short whistles. Long whistles. Sometimes a very long whistle that started high and then went very low.

“Hodgepodge...,” said Molan.

“What?”

“Listen!”

The hedgehog looked puzzled. “Listen to what?”

“The whistling,” said Molan.

As Hodgepodge listened, Molan saw the look of understanding dawn on his face. He had been wrong about everything, even the secret code! Eventually, the hedgehog looked into his detective bag and got out the scrap of notepaper with the code written on it. He tore the paper into tiny scraps. Then he scraped in the ground until he’d made a little hole, and buried the scraps there.

“Right, Molan” said the great detective. “I’m going to eat a lot of worms now, to make up for having such a difficult day. Are you coming?”