

"Hodgepodge! Hodgepodge! Wake up!"

Hodgepodge, the hedgehog detective, groaned. He opened his eyes a tiny bit. It was dawn. The sky was a dark grey, with just a glimmer of brightness starting to appear.

"Who is it?" he yawned.

"It's me. Goose. There's something strange going on! I think we should investigate."

Hodgepodge groaned again. Perhaps it had not been such a good idea to train Goose as an assistant detective. He was just so *keen*. Not like Molan the mole, his other assistant. Molan would never have woken him up at dawn. It was always Hodgepodge who woke up Molan, after first having a good breakfast of juicy worms and crispy beetles.

"Is it urgent, Goose?" Hodgepodge muttered. "Surely there's time for a spot of breakfast first?"

"Well, you're the boss," Goose replied. "But if *I* found out that humans were watching the wood *right now*, *I* would want to investigate straight away!"

"Humans?" Hodgepodge replied. "Are you sure? Humans don't usually bother us here."

"Come and see for yourself. I don't like the look of it. It could be one of the farmer's men. Or a hunter."

Hodgepodge uncurled himself from his cosy bed of old leaves under the hedge. He slung his 'detective bag' – an old human purse on a length of string – over his shoulders, and followed his excited assistant.

"This way, Hodgepodge!" hissed Goose dramatically every few seconds, glancing back. On his big, orange, webbed feet he waddled along very quickly, and Hodgepodge could hardly keep up. The hedgehog was quite out of breath by the time they reached the edge of the wood.

Down below in the valley they could see lights in the farmhouse windows. This was the farm from which Goose had escaped, to avoid being eaten for Sunday dinner.

"The farmer will be up early to milk the cows," Goose whispered. "But look, much closer – in that field over there."

He pointed with a wing, and Hodgepodge peered with his little eyes until he could make out a person, standing very still and looking towards the wood. He shuddered. It was sinister. Why was a human studying the wood so intently?

"I don't like the look of this, Goose."

Just then, there was a rustling in the dead leaves behind them, and Molan the mole appeared.

"Molan!" Hodgepodge exclaimed. "What are you doing up so early?"

"I'm not up *early!*" replied the mole, yawning. "I'm up *late!* I'm just on my way home to my tunnel to sleep. What's going on?"

"There's a mystery, Molan," Hodgepodge said, impressively.

"Yes!" cut in Goose. "I discovered that the wood is being spied on. Look! Over there!"

Molan couldn't see anything in the direction they were pointing out. But he had an idea.

"The spy isn't standing in the field near Fox's den, is he?"

"Yes, that's right!" Hodgepodge agreed eagerly.

"Okay, I think I can solve the mystery, Hodgepodge."

"What is it? Fox hunters?" hissed Goose, paddling his feet on the ground in excitement.

"No. A new scarecrow. Fox told me about it last night. The farmer's planted something in that field, and he's put a scarecrow there."

There was a silence for a few moments. Then Hodgepodge spoke up.

"Goose, let this be a lesson for you. Always make enquiries when something strange occurs. There may be a simple explanation."

Molan thought that this would be very good advice for Hodgepodge to follow himself. He could think of a dozen occasions when Hodgepodge had dragged him around the wood investigating a 'crime' that turned out never to have happened.

"This has been a wild goose chase!" Hodgepodge went on. "As an *assistant* detective, I suggest you leave it to me to decide what needs to be investigated from now on."

Goose apologized, and said he would try to learn from Hodgepodge and Molan, who were so much more experienced than him. Then the three

parted – Molan to go to sleep in his tunnel, Hodgepodge to find some juicy worms for breakfast, and Goose to see if any of the new crop that the farmer had planted in the field was starting to sprout. New shoots coming out of the ground were his favourite meal, and he wasn't afraid of a scarecrow!

Late in the afternoon of the same day, Molan woke up and went out to search for food. The sun was low in the sky, shining underneath a bank of rain clouds that had just blown away. Everything was wet and glistening, and the ground was soft. Perfect for finding worms and digging them out.

The mole's foraging took him to the edge of the wood near where the new scarecrow stood. Out in the oozy field, new green shoots of some crop were growing up out of the ground. And all over the field were criss-crossing footprints. Footprints made by large, webbed feet.

"Goose has been having a feast!" Molan said to himself.

Then suddenly he saw something that made his blood run cold! Coming around the corner of the wood were two humans. They were wearing green quilted jackets and flat caps, and they were carrying shotguns. Mole knew they were shotguns because once, when he was a young mole, he'd seen a pheasant shoot. Birds had fallen out of the sky like rain as a line of humans shot up at them. He would never forget it.

The two humans stopped quite near where the mole was standing. He kept as still as he could, peering out from behind a tree stump.

One of the humans pointed at the ground.

“Oh, he’s been here all right, the little devil. You can see his footprints everywhere!”

The other one nodded.

“It’s bad enough that he escaped. But what a nerve! Eating our new crops! Just wait - I’ll make goose meat out of him!”

“Well, now we know where he’s hiding, anyway. He’ll be somewhere in the wood. Come on – let’s have a scout around before it gets too dark!”

The two humans strode into the trees, and passed by very close to the quaking mole, who held his breath and closed his eyes in terror. He heard them crashing through the undergrowth towards the heart of the wood.

Molan hurried as fast as he could to where Hodgepodge lived. He found the hedgehog detective curled up, snoring loudly. There was no sign of Goose, who was supposed to stay hidden nearby during the daytime.

“Hodgepodge! Hodgepodge! Wake up!” Molan squeaked breathlessly.

“Oh...what...what is it?” said Hodgepodge, half opening his eyes.

“Humans, Hodgepodge! Humans! Looking for Goose!”

Hodgepodge opened his eyes more fully, and looked at Molan sternly.

“Molan. This is the second time I’ve been woken up by an *assistant* detective today. I hope you haven’t made a foolish mistake about a scarecrow!”

“No, Hodgepodge. It’s an emergency. There are two humans in the wood with guns. And they’re looking for Goose!”

Hodgepodge got up and brushed off the leaves sticking to his prickles.

“Well, Goose should be somewhere nearby. He’s supposed to stay on this side of the wood, for safety.”

“But he’s been on the other side of the wood, eating the farmer’s new crop. We’ve got to find him before those humans shoot him!”

The two animals made their way into the centre of the wood. The squirrels, who were usually busy dashing about up in the trees, were very, very still. They called down as loudly as they dared to Hodgepodge and Molan.

“Look out! Humans in the wood!”

Just then, Olive Owl flew onto a branch of a nearby tree. She hooted in alarm.

“Humans!” she said. “Take cover everyone! They’re armed and dangerous!”

“We know already, Olive,” Hodgepodge called up.

“Oh – is that you there, Detective? Well, as someone in authority, I sure hope you’re warning everyone! *A word in time saves nine*, my momma always used to say.”

“Olive, have you seen Goose anywhere?”

“Goose? Nope.”

“Well, he’s in great danger. We must find him!”

“Okay my man, I’ll get on the case. *But it’s easier to pass through the eye of a needle than to find one in a haystack*, I always say.”

Owl flew off, and the detective and his assistant continued on their way. As usual, Molan found himself puzzling over Olive Owl’s wise sayings.

He rarely understood them, but supposed they must be popular American expressions, since Olive was a Western Screech Owl.

They tramped along without seeing any sign of Goose or the humans. But then Olive flew back overhead with some news.

"Goose is by the pond, eating wet grass!"

"Thank you Olive! Come on Molan, let's get Goose to a place of safety!"

The hedgehog and the mole scrambled through the damp spring undergrowth as fast as they could towards the pond. They were nearly there when they heard voices up ahead. Whispering voices.

"There's the little devil now! At the edge of the pond!"

"Careful, now Jack! We need to get a little nearer to get a clear shot."

"The humans! They're going to murder Goose, Hodgepodge!" Molan gasped. This was the first *real* crime that would ever be committed in the wood. Suddenly he felt faint, and wished he wasn't an assistant detective at all.

"We've got to prevent this, Molan," said Hodgepodge grimly.

"But how?" squeaked the mole.

"I'll divert the humans' attention while you run to warn Goose."

"But..."

"Just get ready to run when I give the word."

The bold hedgehog motioned Molan to follow him, and crept forward. Just ahead, in the darkening wood, the two humans were crouching behind a bush. One of them was putting a gun to his shoulder. About twenty metres

away, dabbling innocently on the edge of the pond, Goose had no idea of the danger he was in.

“Go now, Molan!” Hodgepodge said. Then he let out a horrible high-pitched squeal, so loud that it rang from the tree trunks. Molan ran as fast as he could towards the pond, keeping out of sight of the humans. They were looking behind them in astonishment.

“What the heck was that, Jack?” said one of them.

“I’ve no idea. Sounded like someone being murdered!”

Hodgepodge let out another ghastly screech. Molan had never heard him make that noise before. He reached the edge of the pond and waved his arms at Goose.

“Goose! Run away! The humans are here!”

Goose scrambled out of the edge of the pond, webbed feet slipping and sliding in the mud.

“Jack! Look! He’s getting away!”

Goose was rushing off into the trees, wings flapping, like an aeroplane on a runway. A shot cracked out from the gun, and Molan heard the rooks in the rookery at the top end of the wood rising out of the trees in panic, crowing and croaking as if it was the end of the world. But the shot had missed, and Goose, a flapping blur of white feathers, disappeared in the growing gloom of the wood.

Night had fallen completely by the time Hodgepodge and Molan found Goose. He was hiding under the hedge near Hodgepodge's home, shivering and talking to himself.

"It's no good," he said, on seeing Hodgepodge and Molan. "The farmer wants his revenge. I'm a marked goose. I'll never be safe here. I'll have to go and live in that cold, dark tunnel again."

Olive Owl flew down to join the little group. She always wanted to know what was going on.

"Did you say you needed a safe place to live?" she said.

"Yes."

"Well, there's a lake a little ways from here – over the canal, past Buttercup Hill, and beyond the next wood. There's a whole heap of wild geese there right now. Maybe you could hitch up with them!"

Goose appeared pleased and excited by this idea, but then he looked at Hodgepodge.

"But – I've only just started learning to be a detective. Hodgepodge – all the training you've given me would be wasted."

"Oh, that's all right," replied the hedgehog. "After all, I've already got one very good assistant. Anyway, you could always set up a new detective agency at this lake, and come back to report to me every now and again. As a goose, I think you would make an excellent water detective. Not really my line of work at all."

"Oh, wow! That would be really cool!" replied Goose enthusiastically. "I could make a weekly report."

"If you tag along behind me, we can fly over to the lake right now," said Olive. "Those humans could still be lurking around, and *water is thicker than blood*, I always say."

Molan shuddered at the mention of blood. Now that the danger was past, he felt quite exhausted. He also felt a little glow of pride. Hodgepodge had said 'one *very good* assistant'. This was the first time he could ever remember being praised by the hedgehog, who was usually more inclined to grumble and complain about his failings.

"Goodbye, Hodgepodge! Goodbye, Molan!" said Goose, embracing them. "Thank you for everything. I'll come and visit soon!"

Molan and Hodgepodge waved farewell as the owl and the goose flew away into the sky. The moon was just rising over the horizon, and the two birds were silhouetted for a moment as they flew across the white disk, and then disappeared.

"Well, Molan, it all turned out all right in the end," Hodgepodge said. "Shall we look for some worms to eat?"

"Great idea, Hodgepodge!" Molan replied.