

“Molan! Molan! Wake up!”

Molan stirred, sleepily. Surely that wasn’t Hodgepodge calling?

“Molan! I know you’re in there! Wake up!”

It *was* Hodgepodge. He must have finished hibernating. No more long, lazy lie-ins for the mole. The hedgehog detective would be requiring his assistance.

“Come *on!*” the voice went on.

“I’m coming, Hodgepodge,” the mole called. He stretched and yawned, and made his way up to the mouth of his tunnel. It was horribly bright outside.

“There’s been a crime, Molan. While I was hibernating.”

“Oh? What sort of crime? Who’s the victim?”

“Me! *I’m* the victim, Molan!”

“You’re joking! You?”

“Yes! While I was hibernating, someone has stolen my detective bag! It’s a very serious matter. That bag contains all the special equipment I need for solving crimes.”

“You’re sure it’s not lying near your hedge - under some leaves maybe?”

“I’ve searched high and low. It’s definitely been stolen. My first suspect is Millie Magpie – you know what she’s like, Molan!”

“But don’t magpies like small, bright, shiny things?”

“Yes, but maybe she’s started getting big ideas.”

"Or *bag* ideas!" Molan added, feeling witty.

Hodgepodge regarded him sternly. "Molan, this is no laughing matter! We'll go along to the tree where her nest is, and I can hoist you up to have a look."

"Hoist me up?" said the mole. "Do you mean up into the tree?"

"Yes. You know the length of rope I found last year? Well, that will be perfect for the job. You go and wait by Millie's tree, and I'll go and get the rope."

The mole made his way reluctantly to Millie's horse-chestnut tree. He called up to her nest, hoping she would be at home. That would stop Hodgepodge from hoisting him up. Molan was a ground - loving animal, and didn't at all like the idea of going up in the air.

But there was no reply, unfortunately for him. The hedgehog detective soon appeared, bustling along eagerly and carrying a coil of rope over his shoulder.

"Right, Molan. Let's get cracking!"

Hodgepodge tied a piece of wood to the end of the rope, and threw it up in the air. After three attempts, he managed to get the rope over a branch of the tree.

"Excellent!" he said. "Once I hoist you up to that branch, you'll be able to see into Millie's nest easily."

Hodgepodge tied one end of the rope around Molan's waist, and positioned himself a few metres away. He pulled on his end of the rope until it was taut over the branch.

"Ready, Molan?"

"I suppose so."

The hedgehog dug his heels into the ground, flexed the muscles in his prickly shoulders, and pulled on the rope...and pulled...and pulled. Molan felt the rope tugging at him, but he stayed firmly on the ground, much to his relief. Hodgepodge's eyes were bulging, and he was panting with the effort.

"Hodgepodge?"

"Yes?"

"I'm probably stronger than you. Why don't I hoist *you* up?"

The great detective considered this suggestion.

"But I don't like heights," he said doubtfully.

"Oh, you'll be fine!" said the mole cheerfully, untying the rope before Hodgepodge had second thoughts.

They exchanged places, and Molan tied the rope around Hodgepodge's waist.

The mole *was* stronger, with muscles big from years of digging tunnels underground, and in a few moments the hedgehog was off the ground, swinging back and forth on the end of the rope.

"Molan! Hurry up and get me higher. This is very uncomfortable!"

"I'm doing my best."

At last the detective was up to the level of the branch. He grabbed at it to stop himself swinging.

"Can you see into the nest?" called the mole.

"Yes. I can see some milk bottle tops. And a bit of tinsel from a Christmas tree..."

"Can you see your bag?"

"No. My bag isn't there."

"*Can I help you?*" said Millie Magpie, suddenly landing on the branch beside Hodgepodge. She sounded rather cross.

The detective looked very embarrassed.

"Er – hello there Millie. We were..."

"Yes?"

"We were doing some training, weren't we Molan?"

"Yes, training," the detective's assistant agreed.

"What sort of training?" the magpie said, suspiciously.

"Tree operations," replied Hodgepodge. "Molan here was just practising pulling me up into a tree. You've got to be prepared for everything, in our line of work."

"Why were you using *my* tree?" Millie said.

"Oh!" said Hodgepodge, trying to look surprised. "Is this *your* tree?"

"Shall I lower you down now, Hodgepodge?" the mole called from below.

"Yes please, Molan. That's enough tree operations practice for today! Goodbye, Millie!"

Millie Magpie hopped along the branch and looked mistrustfully into her nest while the detective and his assistant quickly coiled up the rope and hurried off.

After Hodgepodge had returned the rope to his store, he and Molan sat on a grassy bank at the edge of the wood to discuss the next step in their investigation.

The hedgehog pointed at a nearby hole in the bank.

"There *are* animals in the wood, Molan, who wouldn't care whose property they took. Foolish, frivolous animals. Animals without a sense of right and wrong."

"The rabbits?" Molan said.

"Exactly."

"Why would rabbits take your bag though?"

"Just for mischief. Rabbits are always doing things just for mischief. Look at all the racket they make in the wood on summer nights! Let's take a look down that rabbit hole."

"But..." said the mole.

"Come on – you can go in front. You're much more familiar with the underground than I am."

The mole led the way unwillingly into the rabbit hole. There was an escalator just inside the entrance, and as they descended, they passed lots of posters on the tunnel walls advertising all the latest rabbit films and shows. Hodgepodge shook his head and tut-tutted.

"What nonsense these rabbits fill their heads with, Molan! Look – what's this for instance?"

The hedgehog pointed at a brightly coloured poster showing a rabbit flying through the air above a ferocious-looking badger with a long sword. The yellow lettering read: *Crouching Rabbit, Hidden Badger.*

Molan shrugged.

"I mean, what's it got to do with real, everyday life?" Hodgepodge went on, in a grumbling tone.

At the bottom of the escalator they arrived at a crowded platform. A train was just arriving, and an echoing announcement said "*This is the Warren Central Line – all stations from Carrot Corner to Bunny's Bottom.*"

"Are we going on the train?" Molan said.

"No, we'll stay on the platform here and make enquiries. Look out for any rabbit carrying my bag."

None of the rabbits were carrying any sort of bags, and most of them seemed to be in a terrible hurry. They barely glanced at the mole and the hedgehog as they rushed by.

"Excuse me, we're investigating a crime," Hodgepodge said importantly to a white rabbit with a waistcoat who had stopped to consult his watch.

"It wasn't me!" the rabbit replied, looking startled and moving away quickly. "Must hurry! I'm late!"

"Excuse me, we're..." Hodgepodge said, approaching two young rabbits who were giggling over something on a mobile phone. The rabbit holding the phone pointed it at Hodgepodge, and there was a blinding flash.

"Got yer photo now, Prickles!" the rabbit said. The two dashed off, giggling even more.

After another ten minutes of disrespectful treatment, Hodgepodge turned to Molan, looking very disgruntled.

"Come on, I've had enough of this, Molan. They haven't got a pair of brain cells to rub together between the lot of them!"

They made their way back up the escalator, Hodgepodge complaining all the way. Once back out of the tunnel, he turned to Molan.

"That's made me hungry, dealing with those silly rabbits. Let's go and grab a bite to eat!"

He led the way to a nearby fallen tree, where beetles were to be found in the rotting bark.

"Eating beetles stimulates the brain, Molan," he said, chomping noisily.

"I prefer worms, on the whole, Hodgepodge."

"Worms are all right," the hedgehog agreed. "But beetles are so lovely and crispy on the outside, and then juicy on the inside."

Molan ate a few beetles, just to keep Hodgepodge company.

"There!" the hedgehog exclaimed at last, "Eating those beetles *has* given me another idea! We'll go and speak to Suggsy!"

Suggsy was a sharp young squirrel who kept a market barrow. He sold all kinds of things that had come his way by falling out of trees or being left lying around by mistake. There were a number of other sharp young squirrels who kept him supplied with goods. He was rumoured to have made enough acorns already from his trade that he could retire to one of the woods further south if he wanted to.

They found Suggsy in his usual spot, in a small, rather secret clearing surrounded by rhododendron bushes. Molan glanced at the barrow, where Suggsy's goods were spread out. There were designer watches and trainers at very low prices, and all the latest computer games and films. Even *Crouching Rabbit, Hidden Badger* was there, for only five acorns. Molan thought he'd like to see that.

Suggsy himself was lounging in a canvas chair, with his baseball cap facing back to front. Molan knew that this always annoyed Hodgepodge, but the detective spoke in a friendly tone.

"Hello Suggsy! How's business?"

"What's that to you grandpa?" Suggsy replied suspiciously.

"We're not here to bother you," Hodgepodge went on in a more businesslike manner. "We're investigating a crime. Has anyone offered to sell you a bag, recently? A leather bag, with a piece of string attached?"

A big grin slowly stretched over Suggsy's face.

"What! You telling me someone's nicked your detective bag?"

Hodgepodge nodded. "Yes."

Suggsy let out a loud laugh and slapped his thighs.

"Well, stone the crows! If that don't beat everything! The master detective's had his bag stolen!"

"It's no laughing matter," Hodgepodge said stiffly.

Two young squirrels carrying a box appeared out of the bushes. Suggsy waved them away urgently.

"Come back later!" he said. "Busy with the *detective* here!"

The two squirrels looked alarmed, and rushed back into the bushes.

Just at that moment, there was a small hoot from overhead. Olive Owl was sitting on a branch of a tree. She was always appearing when you least expected it, and was the nosiest creature in the wood.

"Yo! Hodge, my man!" she said. "I hear you're looking for a bag?"

"Yes!" said the hedgehog eagerly.

"Well, I might be able to put you on its trail."

"Really? What do you know?"

"Well, there's a new hedgehog in the wood. A lady hedgehog. And *she* has a bag."

"A lady hedgehog? In *this* wood?" Hodgepodge said slowly.

"Yep," replied Olive Owl. "Hanging out over on the top side, towards Buttercup Hill. Just set up house there, I do believe. *Home is where the hoot is*, my momma always used to say."

"And this bag that she has...?" Hodgepodge said quietly.

"Looks mighty like *your* bag, my man! Hey, Suggsy! You got any new baseball caps there?"

The detective and his assistant set off towards the top end of the wood.

"We must try to get a secret look at this bag, Molan, and see if it's mine."

"Why don't we just introduce ourselves, Hodgepodge? Then we'll probably see easily if it's yours."

"No, Molan. I'd prefer to be cautious. We'll try to keep out of sight."

As they approached the edge of the wood, the sound of singing came to their ears. A warbling, high-pitched singing. But it wasn't a bird.

"Careful now, Molan! Stay behind me, and move as quietly as you can!"

Hodgepodge scuttled from tree to tree, guiding himself by the sound of the singing. Molan followed. He couldn't see why it was so important to stay hidden.

At the edge of the wood was a bare hedge, and beyond the hedge a lady hedgehog was hanging up bits of cloth along a length of string. This was tied between a stick and a human eating fork stuck in the ground. Hodgepodge gasped.

"My cloths for picking things up without leaving fingerprints! And my piece of string for tying bundles of evidence together! And my fork for digging hidden loot out of the ground!"

"But you never know," Molan suggested, "they might just *look* the same as your things ..."

The singing stopped.

"Is there somebody there?" said the lady hedgehog loudly.

Molan was about to answer, when he saw Hodgepodge signalling furiously that they should stay quiet.

The lady hedgehog peered through the hedge. She laughed.

"A timid mole and a fat hedgehog is what I can see, skulking in the shadows there!"

"*Fat?*" Molan heard Hodgepodge splutter crossly.

"Why don't you come and say hello?" went on the lady hedgehog.

Molan went forward willingly enough.

"Hello!" he said, with a pleasant smile, "my name's Molan."

"Pleased to meet you, Molan. I'm Hortensia."

Hodgepodge was hanging back behind the mole.

"And your friend... good heavens! It's not Hodgepodge, is it? We were at nursery together, do you remember? At Mrs Bristle's."

"Ah. Yes. Hortensia. Hello."

"I'd no idea *you* were living in this wood. I've just moved here. How nice to have an old friend as a neighbour! I'm having such good luck! First I found a splendid handbag, full of all kinds of useful things, and now an old friend!"

Hodgepodge cleared his throat.

"A-hem. This bag. Where did you find it?"

"Just lying under a scruffy hedge on the other side of the wood. A human must have dropped it there. Look, there's even a magnifying glass, which is perfect for when I'm painting my nails!"

"The bag is my detective bag, and the magnifying glass is one of my important tools for detecting crimes."

Hortensia looked at him and laughed.

"*Detective bag!* Oh, Hodgepodge! Now I remember – you were always going to be a famous detective when you grew up!"

"Well, now I am. And I'd be very grateful for the return of my detective bag and equipment, which you have accidentally taken."

Still chuckling, Hortensia gave the bag back to Hodgepodge.

"A pity, it's a nice handbag," she said. "I'll give you the handkerchiefs when they're dry."

"Cloths. They're cloths for picking up things without leaving fingerprints."

Hortensia glanced at Molan. Her look was mischievous, and it seemed to Molan that she might not take Hodgepodge very seriously.

"All right. I know what - why don't you both come back at teatime?" Hortensia suggested. "Then I'll have all this detective equipment cleaned up and ready to go. I'll do a nice tea of worms and beetles for us all. I'm so pleased to meet you again Hodgepodge – you haven't changed a bit! Still the little hedgehog with big ideas that I used to know at nursery!"

The detective and his assistant accepted the invitation, and Molan went back to his tunnel to have a nap. He wondered what effect the arrival of a new hedgehog – especially a *lady* hedgehog – was going to have on Hodgepodge, and looked forward to finding out!