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opening extract from

Wilma Tenderfoot and the Putrid Poison

written by

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For Itsy and the Pig Lizard



Thank you

As ever, I'd like to wave overenthusiastically in the direction of my brilliant agent, Camilla Hornby, without whom I would be a bag of dust. Not only that, but thanks of a massive nature must be hurled down a steep hillside towards my amazing editor Ruth Alltimes, who makes everything better, and Samantha Swinnerton, who has been simply fabulous.

Chapter 1



'Of course I realize now,' said Wilma, consulting her Clue Ring, 'that we have made a terrible error, Pickle. In the Case of the Decoy Duck, Mr Goodman *also* set out to rescue a cat that seemed to be trapped up a tree, but, unlike us, he soon deducted that cats can jump from trees quite happily. Which we cannot. Well, that's that. We're stuck.'

Pickle, who was hanging on to a branch by his teeth for dear life, was in no doubt about it. This was his most embarrassing moment to date. Here he was, swinging precariously from a tree and being stared at by the cat which had, only moments before, seemed in the gravest peril but was now happily sitting in the garden of Clarissa Cottage with not a care in the world. Like most dogs, Pickle had a natural suspicion of cats so being stared at by one whilst in slightly shaming circumstances was more than any dog could bear. The cat shot Pickle a look of

complete disdain and sauntered off with an arrogant twitch of its tail. Oh! This was AWFUL!

Wilma, whose hair was peppered with broken twigs, looked down at her embarrassed beagle. 'How long do you think you can hang on, Pickle?' she asked, trying to edge her way towards him along a particularly creaky bough. 'I hope Mr Goodman doesn't see us. Now I'm his apprentice I should be trying to detect things properly. But, remembering Mr Goodman's top tips for detectives, I don't think I contemplated *or* deducted. It's a schoolgirl error, Pickle. And now I'm going to catch it.'

Wilma Tenderfoot was a small but determined girl. Brought up as an orphan at the revolting Lowside Institute for Woeful Children, she had spent all of her life longing to get away and be like her hero Theodore P. Goodman, Cooper Island's most famous and serious detective. He had a very impressive moustache and a woeful weakness for corn crumble biscuits and peppermint tea. But don't let that bother you now. This is the background bit. Pickle was Wilma's beagle. He had one tatty ear and a reckless love of titbits. They had met in a dusty basement in unfortunate circumstances and, as anyone knows, encounters in dark places with dirty dogs and raggedy children always lead to immediate friendships. Those are the rules.

Due to a series of alarming events involving a stolen stone and a lot of frozen hearts, Wilma, who had been sent away by

the Institute's ghastly matron, Madam Skratch, to work for an equally ghastly mistress called Mrs Waldock, had found herself unexpectedly taken on as Mr Goodman's apprentice. It was a dream come true and she was single-minded in her resolve to be the best apprentice on Cooper. For those of you wondering where Cooper is, all that can be revealed is that it's somewhere between England and France and that if you look hard enough you'll find it. Having said that, Cooper is yet to be discovered by the outside world. There was once a close encounter with a ship captained by Horatio Nelson (the famous columnist), but it was a foggy day so let's cut the man some slack. He only had one eye. He can't be expected to see everything.

The other thing you need to know is that at the precise moment that Wilma became Theodore's apprentice there was what we in the trade call a 'massive revelation'. These are things that induce sharp intakes of breath and cause ladies of a certain disposition to say 'Oooooh!' and indulge in a lot of sudden nudging. In Wilma's case, the massive revelation was that somewhere, perhaps on Cooper itself, she had a relative who was still alive. Imagine that! But let's not get distracted. For now, Wilma and Pickle are stuck up a tree and neither of them knows what to do about it.

This was a bad business. Wilma had only been with Mr Goodman for a week and hadn't had much to do in the way

of detecting. So the small ginger cat stuck in the old pear tree at the bottom of Clarissa Cottage garden seemed the perfect opportunity to get her new job up and running, but instead here she was in another small but sticky mess.

'Wilma!' came the voice of Mrs Speckle, Theodore's not-to-be-messed-with housekeeper. 'Where are you? There's a letter arrived. Got your name on it!'

'A letter?' mumbled Wilma, trying to get her leg round a particularly fulsome patch of blossom. 'Who would have sent me a letter? Oh dear, Pickle. Matters are taking an urgent turn and here we are stuck in sticks.'

Pickle said nothing. But then he couldn't. His mouth was currently occupied and very much unavailable.

As Mrs Speckle's calls boomed from the kitchen, Wilma realized that being caught in the upper branches of an increasingly unstable pear tree with one small dog hanging by his teeth was not the sort of First Week Best Start that any apprentice should hope for. It wouldn't do at all for her to call for help or set in motion a chain of events that some might later be able to refer to as a minor emergency. No. Wilma would have to solve this scrape herself. From extensive and frequent readings of her Clue Ring, the collection of newspaper and magazine articles about Theodore's exploits that she carried everywhere on a metal hoop on her pinafore, Wilma knew that the answer to

drawing any slight crisis to a close was invariably to be found within reaching distance.

Pushing an unwieldy and dangerously bouncy branch out of her face, Wilma squinted downwards. 'Ooooh,' she said, wobbling. 'I wish I hadn't done that. We're actually quite high up, Pickle. Let's try not to think about that.'

Keeping one arm firmly round the pear tree's trunk, which was now emitting worrying and alarming groans, Wilma used the other to clear a peephole through some leaves. Just above her, at the top of the tree, she could see the tail end of a piece of rope. 'That must be the climbing rope for bringing down the pears,' she said, jumping a little to reach it. The tree gave out another shuddering moan. 'There's something very wrong with this tree,' she exclaimed. 'If I was a proper detective, which I'm not yet, but I will be one day, then I would deduce that this is an old tree that may or may not be in grave danger of coming down. Not to worry you or anything.'

Dogs don't have eyebrows, which is a terrible shame, but, if they did, then Pickle's would have been as far up his forehead as they were physically capable of being.

As Wilma pulled the rope towards her, she tugged and checked it was tethered good and tight. Satisfied that the rope was secure, she looped it once round her left wrist and then,

using it to steady herself, made her way towards Pickle. 'Get ready, Pickle,' she said. 'I'm going to use this rope to jump down and I'm going to grab you as I go. We'll be out of this tree in no time.'

The branch Wilma was tiptoeing along began to tremble and judder. Wilma gulped. She'd clearly have to ignore that. It is a general truth that when in a tree that appears to be coming down it's often best to get on with things and try not think about the worst that could happen.

Pickle was now in reach so Wilma, clinging to the rope, heaved herself off the shuddering branch. Swinging by her wrist, she scooped Pickle up in her spare arm, closed her eyes and hoped for the best. But what Wilma had failed to do was tell Pickle to let go, so as they careered down towards the ground the upper part of the tree, pulled by the branch that Pickle was still biting, came with them.

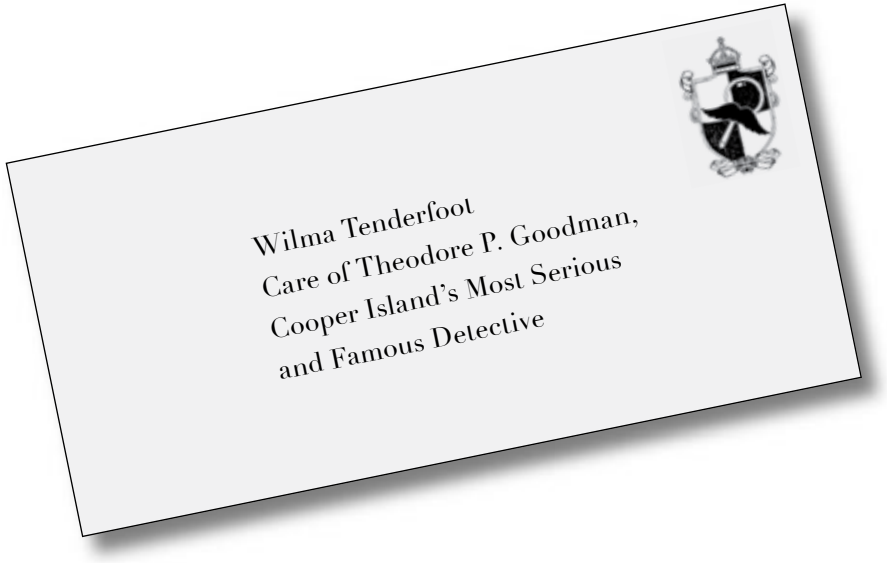
There was a loud, splintering crack and as the old pear tree split at its base, it heaved sideways and sent Wilma and Pickle splattering to the lawn.

'Well,' panted Wilma, shoving a leafy mass out of her face. 'Technically, we're still in the tree. But at least we're on the ground. You can let go now,' she added, noting that a traumatized Pickle was still clenched to his branch.

'Wilma!' shouted Mrs Speckle again, peering from the kitchen window. 'Where are you?'

'Coming, Mrs Speckle!' yelled Wilma, crawling out from under the mass of broken branches. 'Don't say a word about the pear tree,' she added, giving Pickle a conspiratorial nod. 'If anyone's suspicious, we'll just blame the wind.'

The letter that had arrived was addressed to:



On its top right-hand corner there was a crest of a magnifying glass crossed with a false moustache. The letter had been picked off the doormat by Mrs Speckle, dressed head to



toe in her trademark woollen outfit, and was waiting to be delivered to the young apprentice on a knitted tray. Everything Mrs Speckle wore was made from wool, from the watch on her wrist to the spectacles on her face. If it wasn't warm, it wasn't wanted. As Wilma bounced into the kitchen, still spitting out bits of leaf and covered in all manner of tree-based detritus, her employer, Theodore P. Goodman, was standing waiting for his peppermint tea, an afternoon drink, you will remember, to which he was overwhelmingly partial.

'Goodness,' he said, casting his young apprentice a long glance. Her blonde, scruffy hair was a tangle of leaves, her pinafore was covered in grassy smudges, her socks were scrunched down to her ankles and her knees were smothered in mud. 'You look as if you've been dragged through a bush backwards.'

'It was a tree, actually,' said Wilma suddenly, without thinking. Pickle rolled his eyes. So much for keeping quiet.

'A tree?' asked Mrs Speckle suspiciously, picking up the tray and shoving it under Wilma's nose.

'Never mind,' said Wilma, remembering she wasn't supposed to say anything. 'Is that letter for me?' she asked quickly, blowing a caterpillar out from her fringe.

'Well, it's addressed to you,' interjected Theodore, reaching

for the pipe in his pocket. 'Looks quite official, I'd say. You'd better open it.'

Wilma had never received a proper letter before. She stared at the envelope as it lay on the tray and experienced what some people might call a hullabaloo.

'I'm very nervous,' she said eventually, twisting the bottom of her pinafore. 'But, actually, I'm quite excited at the same time. Like the inside of a sparkly drink. Or a bag of bees. Or a load of bubbles. Or . . .'

'Yes, I get the drift, Wilma,' answered Theodore P. Goodman, packing his pipe with some rosemary tobacco. 'That'll do. I suggest you calm yourself. Remember apprentice detectives don't get to be proper detectives unless they are contemplative and occasionally silent.'

'I can try and be contemplative,' said Wilma, bouncing up and down. 'But I don't know if I can do the silent bit quite yet. I'm too full of fizz.'

'Oh, just open it,' grumbled Mrs Speckle, still holding out the tray. 'My arm's getting tired.'

Wilma gulped and picked the embossed envelope off the tray. Breaking the seal on the back, she opened it carefully and read it out loud.

