

## Chapter 4

The night was dark when Jason and Will made their way carefully in through the front gate of Dan Stone's garden. They'd made sure they hadn't been seen, dodging the street lights. A couple of cars had illuminated them, but they'd tried to turn away from the lights, and looked in the shop windows. They rang the doorbell and waited for admittance. They'd already phoned ahead to warn Dan they were coming, to save as much time entering as possible. It was important that the locals didn't link them with Dan. Everyone in the village already knew of his work for wildlife. It wouldn't take a genius to work out what was going on if they'd been spotted.



A young man, in his middle teens answered the door. He was tall, like his father, but fair-haired. He was dressed for sport, and was still holding a ball. "Hi," he said. "You must be here to see Dad." Jason and Will smiled and agreed.

Dan's head suddenly popped out of a doorway further down the entrance hall. "Come in guys," he greeted. "You've already met my son, Greg. No guesses where he's been all afternoon. I hope the homework is done!" He aimed the last comment at the grinning teenager.



Greg shook his head in fake despair. "It's all done and in my file," he said. "Didn't want it hanging over me. I'd rather get it done and then go and play basketball with the lads." He grinned again and raised his eyebrows to the two RSPCA agents. "Fathers!" he gasped, with mock annoyance.

All of the men chuckled. "I used to be just like you," commented Will, "and my Dad was exactly the same. For some unknown reason, they seem to think that homework is as important as basketball," he teased. Greg nodded and headed upstairs to his room. It wasn't long before loud music could be heard.



The men entered the neat and tidy lounge, where a roaring log fire cast light around and gave it a warm, cosy feel. A young girl, slightly older than Greg was draped across an armchair. She smiled and got up as the men entered, offering the two agents her seat. This is my daughter, Lucy," Dan said, in introduction.

"Hi," the girl said. "You are the men who have come to try to sort out the badger problem," she said. "I hope you can. We're all so worried about what has been happening around the county. We couldn't stand to lose our setts."



The two men nodded their agreement. "We'll do our best," will assured her.

"Lucy is as keen on wildlife as me," explained Dan. "Greg too, but basketball is all-important at the moment. His team are in the regional finals next month."

"Then it will be important to him," said Jason. "Sporting finals don't come along every day of the week."

Dan agreed. "The kids have been coming out to badger setts with me since they were small. They are pretty knowledgeable about the ways of the badger."

"So what are you doing with your life, at the moment, Lucy?" questioned Will.

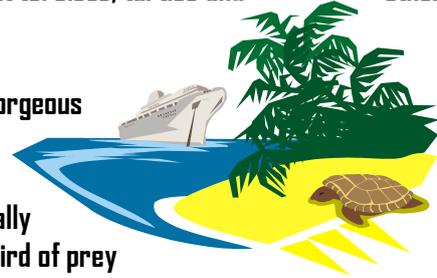
"A-levels," she groaned. "Maths, biology and chemistry."

"So what's the dream?" Jason asked. He was always interested in young people who were making something of their lives. Lucy set to telling the agents, almost without taking a breath!



"I want to follow in the footsteps of a friend of mine. She's a bit older than me. Used to walk me to school when we were younger. She's over in Mauritius, on the Ile aux Aigrettes, in the Indian Ocean, working for the Wildlife Foundation there. She's in charge of all the bird ringing and data handling there. Pink pigeons and things. She also gets to work with the giant tortoises, turtles and other animals on the island."

"It's about 800m of the south east coast of Mauritius. It's in a gorgeous lagoon. Sammy has told me all about walking the trails through the forest. There are loads of rare plants there! It's where Dodos used to live. Pink pigeons are relatives of the Dodo, you know. If you are really lucky, you can see the Mauritius kestrel. They are the only Mauritian bird of prey that we've saved from extinction!," she panted.



"Here endeth the lesson," laughed Dan. "Once you get her going on wildlife, you can't get a word in."

The young girl blushed. "Sorry," she said, "I do go on a bit."

"No problem," smiled Will. "I can listen to it all night. It's great to see someone so enthusiastic about the world around her. Makes a nice change from some of the people Jason and I get to meet in our job!"

"I can imagine," she replied. A frown creased her brow. "You will stop these cruel criminals, won't you?" she said, a sad and concerned expression replacing the happy, excited one she'd had when telling them about her dreams for the future.

"We'll do our best," said Jason, "but we can't do it alone. We'll need help from the Badger Group, the police and anyone else we can get on side."

"You can count on us," Lucy exclaimed. "Greg will be just as keen - he'll fit it in around his precious basketball."

The men smiled at her. "We never doubted it for a moment," Jason responded.

"Well, shall we get down to some work?" Dan suggested.

At that moment, the doorbell rang. Dan's wife, Annie answered it and showed a handful of members of the Badger Group into the room. "I'm making tea and coffee," she announced. She took numbers for each and disappeared again, whilst introductions were made and the group got down to some serious discussion.

The BG secretary was first to speak. "Good news, Dan. We've got the permission for the reinforcement of the main sett up in Brock's Wood. Nothing for the annex sett yet though."

"Brilliant!" exclaimed Dan. "When's it for?"

"Next Saturday," the secretary replied. Just a few days away, so we'll need to get cracking ordering the stuff we need."

The news from the police wildlife liaison was still patchy. Their intelligence was that the setts might be hit, but no one knew just when, or who would be involved. It was information that was not at all easy to come by, and the police and group simply had to prepare for anything and everything, as best they could.

There was much discussion amongst the group about the problems they faced and the worries they all had for the days and weeks ahead.

"We've had some success from the installation of camouflaged cameras to keep an eye on proceedings at the setts," Dan explained to the two SOU agents. "They are simple enough. One of the badger group members knows quite a bit about photography, and has assembled the spy-in-the-tree equipment from a camera and a burglar alarm sensor. We put them high in the trees, where it is almost impossible to see them. If anyone comes to the sett, the cameras go off and we get some great snaps of them."



A 'foxy lady' at the sett.

"Yeah," said another member. We got some great photos of the badgers too."



The flash just doesn't bother them.

"Doesn't the camera bother them?" asked Jason.

"No. We thought it might at first. We wondered about the flashes when they go off at night, but they've totally ignored them. We think they are so used to the floodlights around the farm buildings that they just consider it normal."

"We've a camera at the sett where we have our hide. It's in the middle of the county. Badger Group members can go

up there in the evening and sit and watch as the badgers come out and go about their business," Lucy explained. "It's great. You can sit there, in an armchair, with a double thickness of carpet under your feet, and watch badgers no more than a few metres away from you. Sometimes, they come right up to the windows. We have lights powered by a solar panel, so we can see them. They can't see us, of course. We give them a few peanuts to keep them busy whilst we watch them. It's a magical night!" she gushed.

"Why the double thickness of carpet?" questioned Jason.

"It's for the badgers' benefit rather than ours," Dan explained. "It cuts down on noise from people's feet on the floor. Doesn't startle them. Their welfare comes first."

"I'd love to do that sometime," said Will, and Jason nodded assent.

"I'll arrange it for a night, when all of this is over," said Dan.

Jason and Will tried to explain their part in the process, and to reassure the members that they would do everything in their power to stop the worst from happening and catch the evil gang of diggers and baiters.

"Will and I will be checking out of our hotels soon, and moving up to the woods to live there for a while. We'll see what happens."

A good deal of chat followed until it became quite late. At length the meeting broke up and people prepared to leave. The Badger Group members left via the front door, whilst Jason and Will decided that, as there were quite a few people leaving at once, it might be best for them to leave from the back door. Just as they were



exiting the back gate, into a fairly dark alley, they heard voices from the front of the property. They moved to the alley entrance and watched. A burly man, in his 40s, was standing at the other side of the road. He was bald and carrying rather too much weight. He had a dog with him.

"Hey Stone!" he called. "Leave my lad alone! He told me what yer said up in't woods. You an' yer bunch o' bunny-huggers. Yer want somethin' better ter do!"

"Just trying to keep him out of trouble, Mr Asinine. We wouldn't want him getting involved in something that might lead him into bother," Dan replied, reasonably.

"None o' your business!" the shaven-headed man bawled. "My kids can do what they like!"

"Provided it's legal and doesn't cause anyone any harm," another BG member intervened.

"Geraway!" Chav's father replied, and shuffled off down his garden path, mumbling oaths and threats to the assembled BG members.

"Nice chap!" commented Jason, wryly.

"Lovely!" answered Will. "A real role-model to his family. And then they wonder why their kids don't do well at school and never get anywhere in life. These kids could do so much better for themselves if their families just gave them a bit better guidance. It's such a shame."

The two men strolled back to their lodgings, deep in thought about the night's discussions, and wondering what the near future held, both for them and the badgers of Weardale. Only time would tell.