

## Chapter 6

The three men made their way hurriedly to Brock's Wood. Each one knew what they were going to face. Their stomachs churned at the thought of it. They passed through the first fringes of the wood and dodged tree trunks and trailing branches, catching their clothes and snatching at faces as they went.



Finally, they entered the small clearing where the main sett lay. Kneeling over one of the entrances was a woman, probably in her late 20s, Jason thought. Her hair glowed yellow, like a summer sun. Despite the chill of the spring air, she wore

walking shorts. They breed 'em tough around here, thought Will. She looked up at them as they approached. Her face told them that something was very wrong. She rose and pointed down at a large hole in the ground.

As they arrived, Dan did the honours. "Guys, this is Jan Care of the Badger Group. Jan, these are the two RSPCA SOU agents."

Jan smiled at the two. "It's nice to have you both here," she said. "We really need help."

"So what other damage is there?" asked Jason, eyes ceaselessly roving around the woodland scene. Will's focus was on the hole in front of him. It was obviously not a natural collapse; that much was very obvious to the practised eye, or even an unpractised one.

"I don't think there's anything else, as far as I can see," Jan replied. No tunnels or chambers appear to be breached."

As the group stood and took in the scene, they noticed a movement in the woods. Two people approached. One was a woman, in her early 30s. The other was a large Afro-Caribbean man, who sported a beard on a heavy jaw. Dan rose as they approached and further introductions were made.



"Jason and Will, from the SOU, this is DS Jane Rule and DC Paul Deed of Durham Constabulary. They are the Wildlife Liaison Officers."

The two swapped greetings with the SOU agents.

"So, what's the damage?" the detective sergeant asked.

"Just what you can see in front of you, as far as we know," answered Dan. "We've yet to check the rest of the setts."

The two police stared at the hole in front of them and their eyes wandered around the scene, taking in every detail. "I've asked Alec to attend," Paul Deed announced.

Dan nodded. "He's the forensics scientist. He's good. I'm sure he'll pick something up," Dan told the two agents. "He's helped us on a number of cases, and can usually find a lead somewhere."

**"Do you think they've managed to get a badger out?" asked Will.**

**"Can't be sure," replied Jan. "I hope not. The females will have cubs in the sett at this time of year. It's always a worry."**

**"Cubs are born around February, aren't they?" continued Will. "One of our local badger group education officers once explained it to me."**

**"Yes," replied Jan. "They'll mate at any time of the year, though there are times when it's more common. Then they pull a lovely trick. When the new 'baby' develops to a few cells – we call it the blastocyst stage, it stops growing. It just floats around inside its mum until December. Then it implants into mum and starts to grow again. That way, all the babies are born in February. Clever, eh?"**

**"So, what's the point?" asked Will. "Why can't they just be born at any time of the year?"**

**"If the babies are born in February, they have time to grow in the sett – they really are tiny when they are first born. Mum will keep them there – and will often turf Dad out – until they're much bigger, in late April or early May. Then she'll bring them out and show them around their new world. They are big enough to feed themselves by this time, and it gives them the late spring, summer and autumn to fatten up for their first winter. If they were born in say June, they wouldn't have time. A badger that isn't fat wouldn't see the winter through! Have you ever seen a really tiny baby badger?" she added.**

**"No," said Will. "Can't say that I have."**

**"Oh, you wouldn't believe just how tiny they are," Jan enthused. I once saw a group who'd been rescued when a sett collapsed. There were five of them, and they could pretty much fit under one man's hands!"**

**"Wow!" the RSPCA man gasped. I had no idea they were so tiny!"**



**As if on cue, the big detective constable called to them. "Hey, you'd best come and have a look at this." They walked over, fearing the worst. Would it be a dead badger? Would it be another hole? As they approached, the policeman grinned. "I thought I heard a strange noise," he said. "I thought it was my imagination. The group looked into a bush. There, in front of them, looking up with sorrowful eyes, was a badger cub. He was quite well grown and probably wouldn't be too long in coming out with Mum.**

**"Oh!" said Jan. "We'll have to look after you."**

**Jason glanced at Dan. "Do you think they got Mum?" he whispered.**

**The badger group man shook his head. "Who knows?" he replied. "I don't think we can leave him here though. He'll get too cold tonight, and there are foxes in the wood. Might even be killed by another badger. You never know. I think we should get him checked over, and then we can try to reintroduce him to the sett. I don't know if it will work, but it's worth a try."**

**"I'll get him straight to the vet," Jan volunteered. She went off and came back with an old cloth. She gently picked up the baby badger and wrapped it up. It grumbled a bit and whickered at her – trying to sound fierce, but it soon snuggled up to the girl. "There, you're a bit warmer now, aren't you," she said to the little animal,**

which looked up at her with little black eyes. You could almost imagine him saying 'thank you' for the girl's warm care, Jason thought. Jan strode off through the wood to get the tiny animal to safety and the vet's care.

As she was leaving, she passed another figure, walking in the other direction. "Hi, Alec," she called.

The man smiled at her. "So who have we here?" he asked.

"Just found him," the girl informed him. "He's off to the vet's."

"Oh, he'll love that!" the man grinned. "Don't worry, old son. It won't hurt," he said to the bundle of fur in Jan's arms. With that, he strode on.



When he arrived at the sett, the two police officers greeted him and introduced him to the RSPCA men. "This is Dr Alec Chance," DS Rule announced. "Forensics." The men nodded to one another.

"So, what's happened?" he asked.

"A dig. Just one crowning hole. We're not sure whether they've got away with a badger, but we found the baby lying in the bushes.

"You haven't walked over the scene, have you?" the scientist asked.

"No, we've kept as far away as we can," Dan replied, "Though Jan had walked up to the crowning hole without realising it was there."

"I'll do a cast of her boots, just to rule her footprints out," Alec said. "Now, let's get down to business."

The scientist unpacked some of his equipment. ■ <http://www.wildlifetrusts.org>

- He took out a bag of plaster of Paris, (You can get it from a pharmacy.)
- Next out was a large margarine tub for mixing the plaster.
- Dr Chance then took out a tub of water and a stick.
- Next to appear was a strip of card, 10cm wide and 50cm long.
- Last out were paperclips, which he laid neatly on the ground.
- First the scientist found a footprint and gently cleared away one or two twigs that had blown over it.
- Then he made a circle with the card. He clipped it together and pushed it into the ground around the footprint.
- Dr Chance then mixed 5 large tablespoons of plaster powder into the margarine tub and mixed it with water until it was like smooth cream.
- He poured the plaster carefully into the card ring until it was around 3cm deep.
- He then busied himself around the site and waited until the plaster was set. It took about 10 minutes.
- Then he dug out the cast, collar and print.
- He looked at it until he was satisfied it was good enough.
- Then he carefully labelled it and put it into a bag.



The badger group, RSPCA and police team walked the wood, carrying out a thorough and pains-taking search of the whole area. Nothing could be left to chance in a matter of badger digging. Once the survey was done and Alec Chance had finished his work at the sett, they all set off together to return to the village.

"I think I'll call in at the vet's," said Dan. "We might be able to see how the little furry fellow is doing. Fancy coming along?" The two agents said they'd be delighted, and Dan pulled into a car park at the rear of the surgery. They got out and processed to the rear door. Dan knocked and a veterinary nurse let them in.

"I know why you're here," she said, smiling.

"Yeah, couldn't resist," replied Dan. The girl pointed to a half-open door, and the little party marched in. Sitting in a chair was Jan, badger in one arm and a feeding bottle in the other hand.

"Feeding time!" she announced. "He's fine. The



vet's weighed him. He's quite a good weight. There doesn't seem to be anything else wrong with him, except a huge appetite," she laughed. The three men stood and gazed at the little animal. He'd be fine now, but they could only imagine what might have happened to him, if

Paul hadn't heard his squeaks. They could also only imagine what might have happened to his mum. Hopefully, she'd been able to retreat into the depths of the sett, away from the spades and shovels of the badger diggers, but they couldn't be sure. Anyway, they'd try to get him back to his family. Failing that, it looked as if Jan had a new lodger for a while, until they could make other arrangements for the little animal. Dan would need to contact 'Secret World', and ask if they could house the little mite. He'd be safe and well cared for there, Dan knew.



The agents returned to their woodland lair and made a bite to eat. They were enjoying their coffee when Jan came through the thicket, carrying the baby badger in a cub cage. "Vet says he's fine," she announced. He's looked him over and says we can try to get him back to the sett."

"Great news," said Jason.

The three took the baby, by now named Toby by Jan, and unwrapped him from his blanket. They'd all tried hard to leave as little human scent on him as possible. Jan carefully laid 'Toby' at the mouth of the sett nearest to where he'd been found. Then, all they could do was to sit back, hold their breath and see what happened.



They seemed to be sitting there an age before anything at all happened. Not surprising. The badgers in the sett – if there were any – would be very upset at what had happened to their home, and would probably be reluctant to come out any time soon.

Suddenly, Jan stiffened. She nudged Will, who passed it on. There was definitely movement at the mouth of a hole. A large sow badger suddenly appeared at the mouth of the entrance. She paused for a moment and sniffed the air. Then she emerged half way and took Toby by the scruff of his neck and pulled him gently back into the sett. Badger mothers often handle babies like that; their loose skin means that it doesn't hurt them in the least. (I'll bet you're please that your Mum didn't do that, when you were young!)



"So," said Jason. "All's well that ends well. Toby is back with Mum. We now know that she's fine. And Secret World won't be getting this particular lodger."

<http://www.secretworld.org/>

"Yes, it's great!" smiled Jan. Secret World are fantastic, but it's always nice to see a cub back where he belongs, with his family."

