

Chapter 3

The following morning, Saturday, Jason's phone began to chirrup. He held it to his ear. A voice on the other end said, "Mr Hawk?"

"That's me," replied Jason.

"Dan Stone," the voice proclaimed. "We need to meet."

"Indeed we do," Jason agreed. "There'll be two of us. Where do you want to make contact?"

"Follow the footpath beside the stream. Walk upstream until you come to the road. Turn left and walk until you see a sign for Fell Farm. Follow the public footpath that takes you through the farm yard. I'll meet you there."

"OK," said Jason, and ended the call.

He made his way out of the pub and sat on a bench. He was equipped with all of the usual paraphernalia of the bird-watcher and Rambler. Stout walking boots clad his feet. Jason knew the value of good boots in terrain like this. Waterproof gaiters clung to his legs, protecting his walking trousers from the damp of fields and moors. He'd dressed in layers – springtime in the dales wasn't famous for its balmy weather! A good, breathable coat was fastened to the neck, and a woollen hat crowned the SOU man. In his rucksack was a spotting lens, GPS, camera, white markers, tape measure, plastic pots for samples and a clipboard with sett details reports, disturbance reports and road-kill reports. Sadly, the road-kill sheets were too often called upon. Jason was aware that up to 50,000 badgers per year are killed on Britain's roads. That's the equivalent of one person from every family in Britain being knocked down every year! Badgers just aren't too good at crossing roads safely! He always filled in a report for every badger he saw at the side of the road, and posted it online to the local badger group. That way, they could spot accident black-spots, and might be able to do something about it. (You could do the same. <http://www.durhamcountybadgers.co.uk>)



But venturing into the uplands without the proper gear is never a clever idea, and Jason never did it. He always winced at the many memories he had of people out on the fells in the most ludicrous clothes. Like the girls he'd once seen trying to come down a fell-side in high sandals! Or the four guys he'd once passed whilst climbing Ben Nevis, in the Highlands, in shorts and t-shirts! Any sensible person knew that the weather can change dramatically and violently in the hills, and going unprepared is sometimes pretty near to suicide! A couple of friends he had in the Mountain Rescue Service had told him some pretty incredible stories over the odd pint of beer.

(You can, of course, support your local Mountain Rescue team. Look them up on the internet. <http://www.twsmrt.org.uk>)



Jason looked up to see Will sauntering toward him. "Hello," he called. "Ready for a stroll?"

"Yeah," replied the other undercover agent. "Let's see what Weardale has to offer the walker."

Jason rose and met with his companion. "I was thinking of following the stream a bit. See where it leads to," Jason said, casually. The other man nodded his assent. They both understood that these were the directions for their new contact. They strolled on, casually making small talk as they went.

A weak spring sun was beginning to rise in a bright blue sky. A gentle breeze whispered down from the fells, bringing a refreshing chill to the morning air. The two SOU officers drank deeply of its fresh cool.

Once out of the sight and hearing of anyone who might be curious, they fell to discussing the meeting they were about to have. "So this is the guy from Durham Badger Group?" asked Will.

"Yeah. A nice guy, from what our blokes up here say. Been in the group for years. Very knowledgeable about wildlife – badgers in particular. Sound as a pound in a situation."

"He might have to be!" Will observed, wryly. "What about the local bobbies?"

"Good team, from what I can gather. They've had some useful apprehensions. Just not enough of them on the ground."

"No change there, then," Will grinned, mirthlessly.

The two men made their way up the steeply sloping path beside the stream. It gurgled its way downhill, tossed and churned by the twists and turns, and the stones and boulders over and around which it flowed on its journey to meet the River Wear. The network of streams and rivers of the Pennine dales are an important habitat for the wildlife that lives around them. As the men tramped up the hillside, they stopped to watch a medium-sized bird, with a striking plumage of dark chocolate brown and a brilliant white breast. It bobbed up and down a few times before plopping into the stream and emerging a little farther down with what looked like a caddis fly larva in its beak. It disappeared in a drone of wings, flying low and fast over the stream, leaving nothing but its high-pitched shrilling call. "Dipper," Will observed. "Sign of a good, clean river."



"I've never quite worked out why they bob," said Jason.

"I don't think anyone really knows," his companion replied. "Good name for a dipper, though. Bob." Jason looked at him with a fake look of despair.

The SOU men made good time and emerged onto the narrow dales road. They soon turned to climb over a rickety stile and follow the marked footpath towards the farm. The farmhouse nestled against the rising bank of moorland, which stretched into the distance. A few sheep gathered beside the dirt the main gates, and they seemed untroubled by when they came within trot away, turning to look meal. They seemed to glare,



the approach of the two walkers, and only their flight distance, did they look up and at the men who had interrupted their Jason thought.

As they neared the farmyard, a figure stepped out from behind a barn. He too was a tall man, even by SAS standards, and was spare-framed, without an ounce of fat. A neatly-trimmed beard framed an intelligent face, and spectacles outlined his eyes. He too was dressed for walking, with blue walking trousers tucked into high wellingtons. A bright red

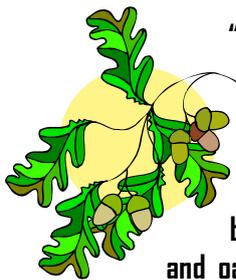


waterproof covered his upper body, and a rucksack draped down his back. It seemed full and looked heavy to the two RSPCA men. "Mr Hawk?" he said, as they neared him.

"Jason," he replied. "And this is Will." Will nodded his blond head and smiled. "You must be Dan Stone," Jason continued.

The other man nodded assent and smiled. "I've been looking forward to meeting you. I wasn't expecting *two* officers. The RSPCA must be taking our badger digging epidemic seriously to afford two specialists."

"The RSPCA always take badger baiting seriously," responded Will. Dan Stone winced and colour began to creep above his collar. "But I know what you mean. Not always the money we'd like to throw at these things, otherwise there'd be ten of us!" Dan nodded in agreement and seemed a little less embarrassed.



"So, shall we go and have a look at the problem?" suggested Jason. Dan nodded and turned to continue up the farm path, towards a clump of woodland. As they walked, Dan explained that the most ancient surviving woodlands in the Pennines are only to be found up in the most remote places, where it was generally just not worth the effort of the early farmers to fell them. These are still growing in the steep valleys, along the banks of the streams and rivers. Here are oak and ash – ash on the more alkaline soils, and oak where it is more acidic. Beneath the ash grow drifts of bluebell, wild garlic and primrose, whilst beneath the oaks, flourish wood anemone, wood sorrel and wavy hair grass.

The dales woodlands are an important habitat for birds, returning from their long migrations south to avoid the winter chill of northern England. In spring, the woods seem to come alive with the beautiful dawn chorus the nomadic residents create.

As they tramped through the woodland fringe, a redstart sat, flicking its tail, exposing bright orange tail feathers. Its face black, its back grey, contrasting with the bright flaming orange of its breast.

Further into the wood, Will put out an arm to stop the others. The two immediately froze; their senses coming into play automatically. Silently, Will pointed to the tree in front of them. A male pied flycatcher had alighted on a branch. It wasn't noticed easily, against the newly-sprung woodland foliage. Once spotted though, his striking black and white plumage leapt out at them. He made a short hop to another branch, snapped up an unsuspecting insect, and then returned to his favourite perch to devour it.

"You stopped us like that for a bird? enquired Jason. "I thought it was something sinister!"

"One of my favourites," Will grinned, showing his white teeth.

A little further and another occupant could be heard, though not seen. It seemed to erupt from the tops of the trees above their heads. Had they seen it, they'd have admired an olive-green back and a breast that faded from yellow to white. They were listening to the song of the wood warbler.

Dan stopped beside a tree and picked up a fist-sized stone. He knocked it rapidly against the trunk of a tree, and then listened. A couple of tries later and he got his hammering reply, as a woodpecker wondered who else was in his bit of woodland. It would appear soon, to see what was going on, and to establish exactly who went there!



A whole musical collection of sounds could be heard from the birdlife feeding, nesting and hiding out in the dales woodland. Some of the calls the men could identify – others not.

Blackbirds and thrushes were certainly there. The tit family were also well-represented! A tawny owl sat where a branch met the trunk, peering down with eyes that seemed half closed. It knew they were there, but they had no idea they were being observed from on high. <http://www.rspb.org.uk/>



A short way into the wood, on a steep bank, they stopped and admired a good-sized badger sett. "A pretty typical site for a sett," explained Dan. "Badgers like to dig setts into hillsides as it allows them to get deep very quickly. They like sandy soil too - easier to dig."

"It's quite near to the woodland edge," observed Will. "You can see the edge of the wood. I'd have thought they'd want to be a bit further in."

"No, they like to be near to the ecotone - the woodland edge. It gives them quick access to more than one habitat. Pasture is their favourite - plenty of worms, their favourite food. Woodland isn't really that good a larder, I'm afraid. But it makes great cover." The two RSPCA men took in the information with a nod.

The three men gazed at the sett entrance. It was unmistakable as a badger sett. The hole was wide and arched. Badgers are wide and stocky animals, so a narrow hole simply wouldn't do. Ok for a fox, but not the badger. There was also a lot of spoil at the entrance; a sure sign that the animals had been having a clear-out. Dan had long since ceased to be amazed by how much earth a badger can shift! The groove made by the badger could be seen in the still-damp earth. Dan knelt down and ran his hand through the soil, and pile of old straw bedding. Deftly, he pounced and picked up a long guard hair from the back of a badger. "There's your conclusive proof it's badgers living here," he announced, though it was hardly necessary in this case. "You can always pick out badger hair," he explained. "Firstly, it's not grey. Badger hair is actually banded in black, white and brown. It's also flat, like a knife blade, rather than cylindrical, as with most animals."



He handed the strand to Jason, and he turned it in his fingers. "Hmm, it doesn't really roll properly," Jason observed. "It kind of clicks over between your fingers." He passed the hair to Will and he too felt its shape and nodded.



"Best place to look for it is on low barbed wire fences," Dan continued. It gets caught when they duck under the fences on their nightly forays to the pastures. Just look for trampled trails heading for the fence-line.

The three men set to work surveying the sett. Dan had surveyed and measured it many times in the past, but it was always useful to do it again. Besides, the two SOU agents needed the data for their

records. They took 10-figure GPS readings for each entrance to mark the spots accurately. They photographed the entrances and spoil heaps, placing white number cards to record positions of each entrance. Some entrances were very obviously busy, whilst others seemed less favoured. Some were filled with dry leaves and spiders' webs. "Badgers are funny animals," said Dan. "They will often use one entrance and then just leave it and open another. No one really knows why."

"So this is the sett you think they'll hit next," observed Jason, peering around to assess the area for a hidden look-out point. If he and Will were to live rough in the wood for a while, they'd have to have a secure camp site and spots from where they could monitor the area without discovery.

"Might be," Dan allowed, "but we really don't know. There's an annexe sett a little further up the valley. Could be that one? Could be somewhere totally different. We are just going on the little intelligence we have."

"Better check it out," suggested Will. They tramped up to the annexe sett and went through the whole process of surveying and logging details again. "I'll enter it all on the laptop tonight," Will stated. "I can send it all over the net, to headquarters."



"We are hoping to get permission to reinforce these two setts," Dan said. "I just hope we can get it done in time, before they are hit!" The men nodded their agreement. They knew that reinforcement couldn't be carried out without permission from Natural England. And getting a licence was never easy. The Badger Group would have to give fine details of why it was necessary, and how it was to be done. Then they'd be given a date on which to do the work – come hail, rain or snow! Of course, the rules might seem to be a pain, but they were there to protect the badgers.

Once the setts were surveyed, the men sat on a bank, beneath the trees and gazed around them. So the Badger Group's intelligence pointed to this area for the next attack. It wouldn't be difficult. Jason could imagine that this would be a possible target. All the factors were there.

The two RSPCA agents arose and wandered around the woodland, taking in every feature. Where would they site their camp – or even *camp*s, if the need arose? They needed shelter. They'd need to do some feeding off the land, despite hauling some supplies of their own. There were obviously rabbits in the wood – their droppings advertised their presence. There would probably be trout in the stream, a little further down. There was also some edible vegetation. Could they cook over an open fire without smoke crawling skyward through the tree canopy? They certainly wouldn't want flames lighting up the underbelly of the woodland, and alerting the local louts to their presence. Nothing could be left to chance!



In one corner of the wood, Will found a lovely old well. It was pretty much full of soil and debris now. That could be

useful, he thought to himself. He'd show it to Jason later.

The cover in the wood would do it would have to!

Presently, the SOU men stopped their meandering and returned to the bankside, where Dan Stone had watched them intently; wondering what was going through their military minds.

The three men began their stroll back through the woodland, each thinking their own thoughts. Suddenly, a noise was heard ahead. It was not a woodland noise. It was the noise of people talking and dogs snuffling through the undergrowth and leaves. The three stood stock still and listened, trying to pin-point the sound. Dan looked around and was astonished to find that he was alone. The SOU agents had melted into the woodland as if they were figments of his own imagination. He too stepped behind a tree trunk and tried not to breathe too heavily.

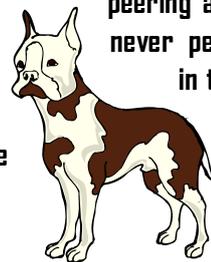


Presently, two teenage lads hove into view; two bull terrier-type dogs on thick leads. The dogs sniffed the air and grumbled. The two youths ignored them and continued, looking around them and conversing about their surroundings.

"Nice place for it," one commented, cackling a strange laughter.

"Yeah. Out of the way. Nobody can see," grunted the other.

As far as they were aware, they were alone in secluded woodland, away from prying eyes. Sadly for them, three pairs of eyes and ears were observing their every move. Jason and Will had followed their army training and disappeared. They were flattened against the ground, from around the base of tree trunks. It was a useful rule that you at normal head height. Any movement at eye level would register the person observed. At foot level, it would rarely be noticed. Dan as his name, behind a large pine tree. He listened intently to the panting, snuffling and growling of the two dogs.



"Must 'av smelled a rabbit," one of the youths said. The other on the lead of his dog.

Stone stood as still conversation and to

nodded and yanked

At that point, as the youths almost passed him, Dan stepped out from behind the tree. "Looking for something, guys?" he questioned. The two jumped visibly, collided like two clowns in a circus routine, and then stood and gawped at the Badger Group man.



"Whatcha do that for?" the first yelled. "I nearly jumped out of me skin!" The other just continued to gawp, obviously stuck for any intelligible words to express his surprise.

"Just wondered what you were looking for way up here. Seems a long way to go to walk the dogs," Dan replied. "Anything I can help you with?"

The second youth found his voice. Beneath his hood, was an evil, weasely face. He gave Dan a challenging stare. "It's the badger bloke, init?" he snorted. "We's just walkin' the dogs, int we? Nuffin to stop us, is there? We aint doing nuffin wrong."

"Just as long as that's all you're doing," said Dan. "We wouldn't like you to get into any trouble, would we?"

"What you gonna do abou' it?" the first youth challenged. "Fink yer 'ard, do yer?"

Dan's eyes fastened on the youth. He was a big man, and quite imposing. "Haul your cargo!" he rumbled. The two youths turned, grumbling. "Let's went." said the lout, and they dragged their growling dogs away, back the way they'd come, turning only to direct a few rude signs and to shout abuse at the man once they were far enough away to feel safe from pursuit. Dan smiled to himself at the change of heart of the two 'toughs'.



Once the coast was clear, the two agents came out from their cover. It wouldn't do for their faces to be known to suspicious locals. "Hmm. Not at the front of the queue when the brains were dished out," Jason observed.

"No," Dan chuckled. They're local lads. The gingery one is Charlie Asinine - know to his friends as 'Chav'. The other bright-spark is Jim Dim - yes really! He's known to his mates as 'Yob'. "They went to primary school with my kids. An IQ to fit their shoe size, I'm afraid.

"Yeah, I kind of guessed," interjected Will. "Light travels faster than sound. This is why some people appear bright until you hear them speak."

"Come from a couple of dubious families," continued Dan. "Fathers not fond of work. Mum won't get out of bed in the morning. One older brother is well known to the local magistrates. Houses a tip. Old cars in the garden. Kids won't go to bed, won't go to school. Little kids run wild, making life a misery for some of the old folk. It makes you wonder what they would think if someone made their grandparents' lives miserable." The two agents nodded.

A couple of the government's 'Troubled Families'. People have done their best to help them, but Well, you can't help people who won't be helped. If they made the effort, their lives could be so much better. But the effort has, of course, to come from them. No one can do it for them.

"So, do you think they are our badger baiters?" asked Will.

"Sadly not, I'm afraid. They'd be easy to stop. No, these lads are just the scouts for a bigger organisation. The police reckon they're a professional gang from one of the big cities - probably Manchester," he explained.



"They'll come up here and use the local louts to show them where the setts are. That's where our two bright sparks come in. Once they've found the sett, they'll put a dog down. The dog will wear a radio collar. It will search until it's found a badger. Then it holds it at bay. The criminals on the surface track the collar, dig down and take out the badger.



Once out, it will be put into a sack and thrown into the back of a van. It then makes the long journey back to Manchester. *But, for the badger, that's the easy bit!*

Badger digging still goes on all around the country! IT DOES GO ON WHERE YOU LIVE!

Badger digging is a serious criminal offence. Diggers who are caught are given a heavy fine and a prison sentence.

