

THE  
WOODLAND  
BADGER

*For all the campaigners working so hard  
to protect their local wildlife.*

HW

*For Mum*

DD

LITTLE TIGER

An imprint of Little Tiger Press Limited  
1 Coda Studios, 189 Munster Road,  
London SW6 6AW  
[www.littletiger.co.uk](http://www.littletiger.co.uk)

Imported into the EEA by Penguin Random House Ireland,  
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68  
[www.littletigerpress.com](http://www.littletigerpress.com)

A paperback original

First published in Great Britain in 2025

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Illustrations copyright © David Dean, 2025

Author photograph copyright © Lou Abercrombie

ISBN: 978-1-78895-746-5

eISBN: 978-1-78895-777-9

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available  
from the British Library.

STP/3400/0635/0325

Printed and bound in the UK.



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# THE WOODLAND BADGER



Holly Webb  
Illustrated by David Dean

LITTLE TIGER  
LONDON





“Poppy! We’re going to the allotment, are you ready?”

“I’m doing my homework!” Poppy called back.

“Can you bring it with you? I need to water all my seedlings.”

Poppy looked down at her maths worksheet and sighed. It wasn’t that she didn’t like the allotment – not when it was sunny, anyway – but it wasn’t the best place to get homework done. There were butterflies to watch, and huge bumblebees zooming about, and one of the

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other allotment gardeners almost always came over for a chat. Poppy didn't mind that – the gardeners were all very friendly, even though Poppy had been too shy to talk to them at first. Bees and butterflies and chatty gardeners didn't make it any easier to do fractions though. But Mum was right – she did need to water the new young plants. And check there were no slugs and snails hiding in among the leaves, and watch out for blackfly, and tie up the tomato plants, and a hundred other things. The allotment was a lot of work, but Mum loved it. Poppy did too, even though she moaned about having to go there almost every day.

Luckily, the allotment was really just at the end of their garden, so it wasn't far. Poppy's house was the last one in a little side road, with the allotments at the end, so all they had

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to do was go out of their front door, through the allotment gates and they were there. Mum said she wished they could just put a door in the garden fence, but it would open straight on to Fred Wilson's potato patch. Fred was lovely – he kept a tin of toffees in his shed, and he'd always offer one to Poppy when he saw her and Mum working on their allotment. But he wouldn't be keen on them walking over his potatoes.

Fred was digging in his allotment as they walked past now, Poppy clutching her maths worksheet and her pencil case, and Mum carrying a bowl. She was hoping to pick the first of her strawberries; she'd been watching them carefully for days, and she was sure they'd be ripe and ready today. She'd promised strawberries and ice cream after tea.

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Poppy went to the little shed and pulled out a camping chair and an old magazine to lean on. She was just settling down to do her fractions when she heard a cry from the strawberry patch.

“Oh no!”

“What is it?” she called back.

“The strawberries. They’re all gone. Or half gone – they’ve been munched.”

Poppy got up and went to look. Mum was right – the strawberries all had big chunks nibbled out of them.

“Slugs?” she said, looking at the damage.

“Probably.” Mum sighed. “There’s a lot of slug trails about. Sorry, Pops. No strawberries for tea today. We’ve still got the ice cream, though.”

“What did the little monsters get?” Fred

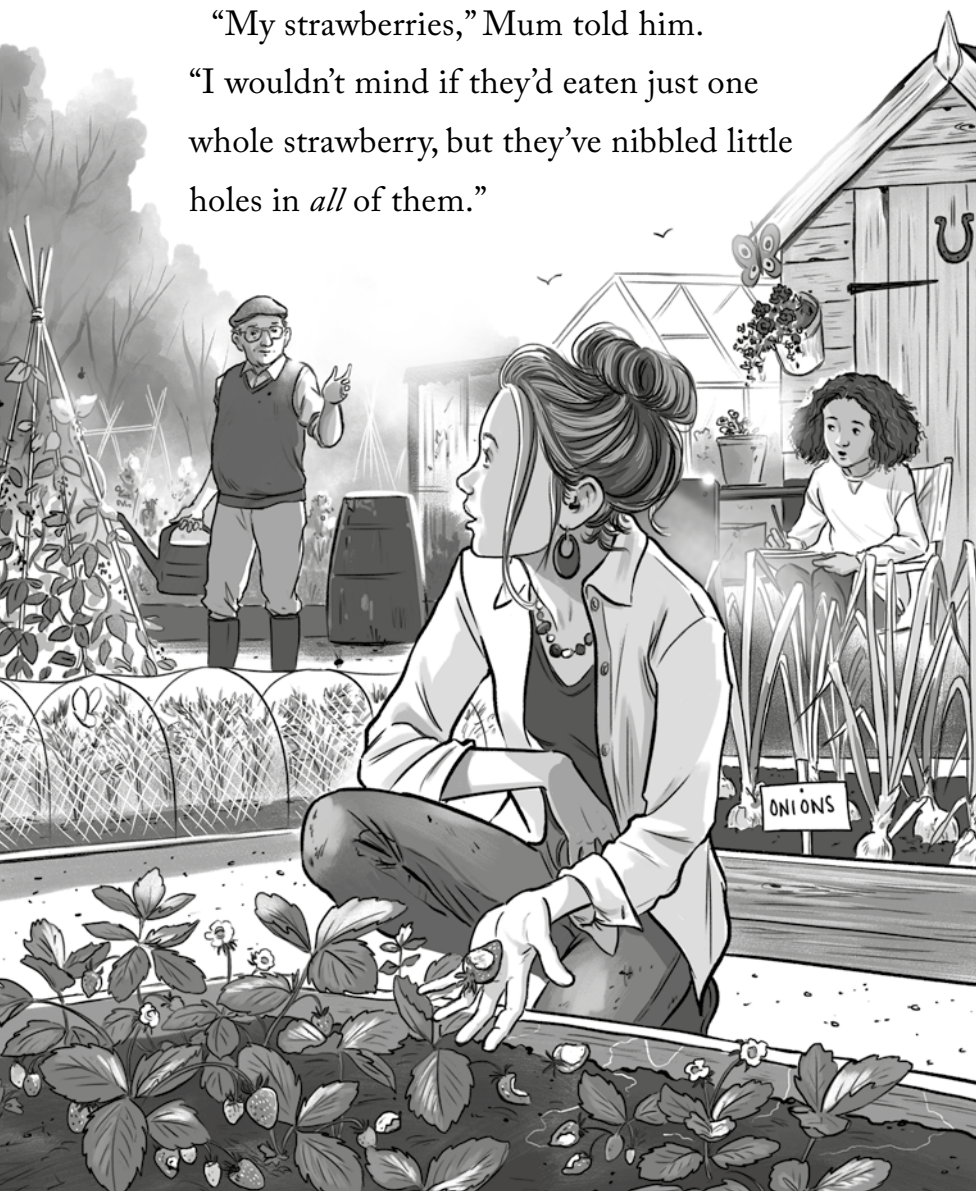


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asked. He was carrying a watering can, and obviously on his way to the tap to fill it up.

“My strawberries,” Mum told him.

“I wouldn’t mind if they’d eaten just one whole strawberry, but they’ve nibbled little holes in *all* of them.”



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Fred shook his head. "Typical slugs. Never mind. You stop by my plot on your way home, I've got more strawberries than me and Sheila can eat. Don't want you missing out. But you need to sort out those slugs."

"Oh, that's really kind of you!" Mum smiled. "If you're sure."

"Why don't slugs eat *your* strawberries?" Poppy asked.

Fred laughed. "Because I hunt them. I pop back to the allotment just before I go to bed." Fred and his wife Sheila lived a few doors down from Poppy and her mum, so he didn't have to go far either. "I bring a torch, and I search them out and put them in an old jam jar."

"Then what do you do with them?" Poppy wasn't absolutely sure she wanted to know...

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Fred sighed. “Well, I probably ought to squash them, but it feels mean.”

“And disgusting!” Poppy said. “I stood on a slug once by accident, it was a really huge one, and it was just – yeeeuuccchhhh.”

“Exactly... So I take the jam jar and I tip it out over those brambles.” Fred waved at the little wood at the far end of the allotments. “I reckon it must take the slugs a week or so to get all the way back to my strawberries from there.” He leaned close to Poppy and tapped the side of his nose. “And I have to admit, I don’t mind the idea that they’ve got to wriggle across those prickly brambles too.”

“I might try that...” Mum said thoughtfully. “Fancy a midnight slug-hunting expedition, Poppy? I bet we’d see all sorts of other animals too.”

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Fred nodded. “Foxes, hedgehogs.” He laughed. “Maybe that’s what you need, Lucy,” he told Poppy’s mum. “A pet hedgehog. She could eat up all your slugs.”

“Is that what hedgehogs eat?” Poppy asked, sounding horrified. She couldn’t imagine eating a slug...

“Slugs, beetles, worms. All the creepy-crawlies.” Fred grinned at her.

“I definitely need a hedgehog.” Mum nodded.

“There’s lots of wild creatures living in that little wood,” Fred told them. “I saw a deer early one morning last week – a little muntjac deer. Tiny thing it was. And there’s a fox with a litter of cubs, I watched them playing the other night.”

Mum laughed. “I think we heard them. I love hearing the noises from the woods and the

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allotments, it feels like we're in the middle of the countryside."

Fred looked round. "Nearly six. The light's fading a bit. Stay a bit longer, and sit quiet, and you're bound to see something. Pass me that bowl for the strawberries, Lucy, and I'll pick some for you. I've got to head back home in a minute."

Mum smiled at Poppy. "What do you think? Want to stay for a bit? We could have our own little safari..."

Poppy nodded. "I've got to finish this maths, anyway. I can sit still and do a worksheet. I shouldn't think any animals are going to notice me writing, are they?"

Mum nodded and pulled another garden chair out of the shed. "I wish I'd brought a flask of tea."

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“What do you think we’ll see?” Poppy asked her. “I’d love it to be a hedgehog. I’ve never seen one before, and they look so cute in photos – tiny little legs, and all those prickles.”

“I don’t know. I love the thought of that deer Fred was talking about. A muntjac. Do you remember last summer, you woke up in a panic in the middle of the night because something was making screechy barking noises? I think that’s what it was. So we’ve *heard* them, but never seen them.”

Poppy shuddered. She remembered being woken up by those strange sounds. She’d been so scared. She’d clung on to Mum, her heart thudding and racing inside her. “You didn’t tell me that.”

Mum nodded. “I know – I was hoping you might just forget about it.”

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“Here you go.” Fred stomped over and handed Mum her bowl back, brimming with scarlet strawberries.

“Oh, they look wonderful, Fred – lots nicer than mine were. And they smell so good! Poppy, smell these, it’s like summer in a bowl.”

Poppy sniffed, laughing. She could see what Mum meant, though. The strawberries smelled so sweet and fresh. She couldn’t wait to eat them.

“Only a few strawberries,” Fred murmured, but he looked pleased. “See you tomorrow, I should think. Keep an eye out for hedgehogs. Tell them you want those slugs gobbled up and send them over to my patch too.” He waved as he headed to the gate, and Mum and Poppy settled back in their camp chairs, enjoying the quiet. There was no one else in the allotments

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now; they had it all to themselves.

Poppy did another couple of questions on her sheet. Nearly finished now... She shivered a little. The warmth was quickly going out of the day – but the light was beautiful, soft and golden.

“Mum...”

Her mum gave a little jump in her chair.

“Were you asleep?”

Mum laughed, sounding a bit embarrassed.

“Not really...”

Poppy was just about to tell her off – not meanly, but because it was funny – when she froze. Something was padding cautiously round the edge of the wooden raised beds on the next plot. Sniffing at Lily and Jack’s runner-bean plants...

A fox!





“Mum, look...” Poppy breathed, reaching out one hand, so slowly, to touch Mum’s sleeve.

“Oh...” Poppy could hear that Mum was smiling, it was there in her voice. “Oh, what a beauty...”

The fox trotted towards them – it didn’t seem to have noticed they were there. It drew level with Poppy’s chair, so it was only three or four metres away, and then suddenly stopped, realizing it had company. It didn’t look too

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worried, though. It just stared at Poppy and Mum, like they were something very strange. Poppy almost expected it to shake its head, the way Fred did when he saw something on the allotments that he didn't really approve of. Like people leaving the tap dripping, and making a muddy mess...

The fox thought Mum and Poppy were a bit of a muddy mess.

Poppy stared back, trying to remember all the details. She should have reminded Mum to have her phone out, just in case they needed to take photos. The fox had a beautiful dark muzzle, and a white throat. White tail tip. Inky-black socks on all four paws – like it had been in the mud too...

The fox gave them one last stare and trotted on by.

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“Oh, Poppy!” Mum breathed. “That was amazing, so close! I wasn’t really sure we’d see anything.”

“Have you got your phone?” Poppy asked.  
“We should take photos!”

Mum dug into the pocket of her scruffy gardening trousers and pulled it out. “There. Ready. Though I’m not sure we’re going to see anything else –” She stopped, staring across the allotments towards the woods, her mouth still open.

“What? *What?*” Poppy hissed. She couldn’t see what Mum was looking at.

“Just coming out of the trees,” Mum whispered. “At the end of the path. Poppy... I think it’s a badger. I’ve never seen one before...”

Trundling towards them along the path was

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a rounded, black-and-white creature. It had stubby legs, and a stripey, pointed nose and neat little ears. It was hurrying along quite fast,

and every so often it stopped

to snuffle at clumps of grass, or sniff at one of the allotment plots.

It came closer and closer, following the path between the plots that led straight towards Poppy and Mum.

Poppy could see its bright black eyes now, and the pattern of black stripes down its



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face. It had little white tufts at the top of its ears.

“It’s smaller than I thought they would be,” Mum whispered to her. “Maybe it’s a young one?”

“What’s it doing?” Poppy breathed. The badger was snuffling in another patch of grass now. It almost looked like it was eating something. Did badgers eat grass?

“I think it’s hunting for worms.”

“Worms?” Poppy squeaked, and the badger looked up sharply. Mum was right. The very end of a worm was dangling out of its mouth – and as they watched, the badger slurped up the last bit, like spaghetti. Then it whisked round and jogged away along the path, its funny blunt tail bouncing.

“Oh, I scared it away! Sorry, Mum...”

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“I don’t think it would have come much closer without spotting us, don’t worry. Wasn’t it sweet?”

Poppy nodded. “Do you think it’ll come back another night? Will we see it again?”

“Maybe...” Mum stood up, folding away her chair. “It’s definitely time to go back home now, though, we haven’t even had dinner.”

Poppy giggled. “It’s not spaghetti, is it?”