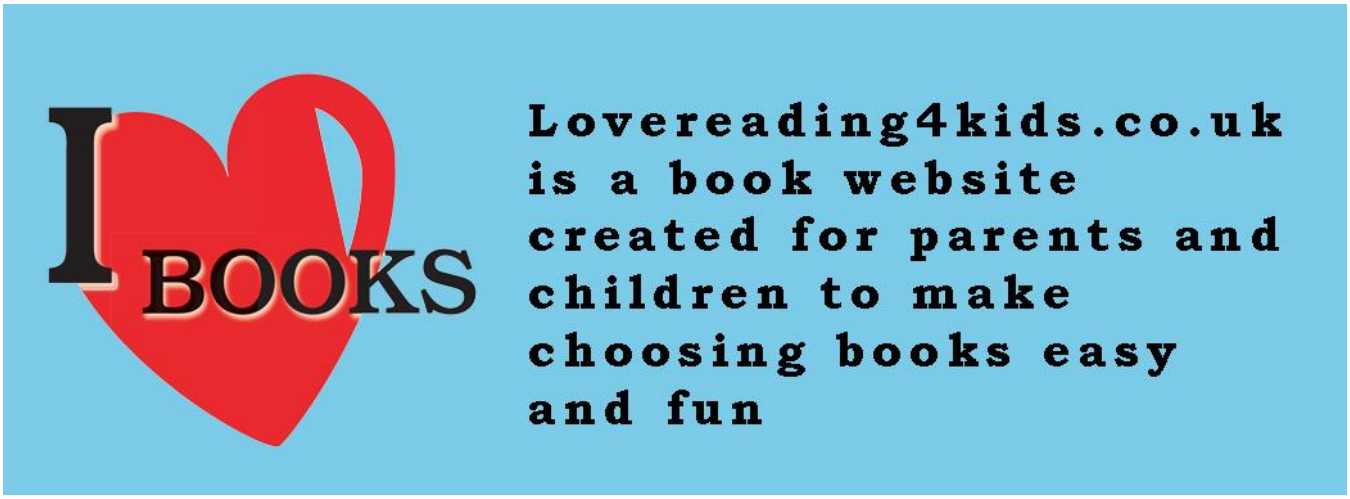


Opening extract from

Uncle Shawn and Bill and the Almost Entirely Unplanned Adventure

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For Honor and Xavier

With Thanks



SECTION ONE

In which a brave and handsome young badger called Bill meets two extremely dreadful sisters and begins an adventure he may not survive. He also has a sore ear and remembers that he doesn't like shorts, especially when he is wearing them.

Badger Bill was having a very bad evening, maybe the worst of his whole life. He was stuck inside a bag. It was an extremely scratchy and horrible bag and it smelled as if someone who was also a badger had been crying inside it a few days earlier and then maybe after that had been sick. Bill was small and young but very clever, and he was



able to guess that whoever had snatched him up when he wasn't expecting it and put him in the bag was now *carrying him somewhere*. He was being bounced and banged about with no care at all, so whoever was carrying him horribly in the horrible sack was probably a horrible person. Badgers have a highly developed sense of smell and he could tell just in one sniff that whoever was carrying him had a heart full of nails and sand and nastiness.

Bill guessed he was balanced over the horrible person's shoulder. Every now and then what he thought might be their elbow banged him hard in the back of his neck. And he was definitely upside down. This all suggested that the horrible person and the horrible bag were heading for somewhere that would also turn out to be horrible. This made Bill worried. It would make anyone worried – even if they were clever and brave. Meanwhile, the big, horrible feet of the big, horrible person pounded onwards.

Bill's whiskers were all bent, his ears were dented and he felt miserable and bruised and very puzzled. "But I was just out for a stroll," he thought to himself. "I was going to pick some sage and make tea with it when I got home. Only then I turned left instead of right and I got distracted by those squirrels talking about having seen some llamas. Everyone knows there aren't any llamas anywhere near here. Llamas come from South

America and we're in Scotland. And after I had explained this for the eighth time – squirrels are so stupid – I couldn't quite remember where I wanted to go and I … I sort of got lost…"

Bill was embarrassed that he'd got lost, because he had always wanted to be a famous explorer when he was older. There were many great badger explorers – Horatio Badger, who canoed round the Himalayas, for example; or Matilda Badger, who ran with the buffalo on the Great Plains of America until she died of excitement at the age of 87.

Bill was ashamed. "I got a little bit lost and then I thought I saw a weasel looking nastily at me from under a bush. It was just a weaselly shadow, but I ran away from it and that made me get *really* lost." Which is often what happens when we're tired and aren't really sure where we are and then get scared as well. "And now I'm thirsty and lonely and whoever is carrying me smells of being unkind and I already know



they're unkind because they *put me in a bag. Without asking.* All I want to do is go home and sit in my little badger rocking chair and play my mouth organ until I feel happier, and then go to bed. And maybe have a hot chocolate and a lettuce sandwich first. And a biscuit. And then an apple." He was a resourceful badger, but he felt much smaller than usual, and wobbly. "But I'm not at home. I'm in a bag! Why would anybody want a bag of badger?"

Before he could be puzzled any more he suddenly smelled the smell of someone else horrible nearby and felt himself being swung downwards, shaken roughly and tipped out of the bag onto a cold stone floor. He landed all in a heap. "Ow!" he squealed. Then he tried to make himself sound more courageous by shouting, in as deep a voice as he could manage, "What are you doing with me? You, you…"

Only then he stopped speaking, because standing over him were two of the hugest human beings he had ever seen. They were probably ladies, but they were each as wide as a wardrobe and seemed almost as high as a bus. Their hands were grubby and leathery and bigger than Bill's head. Both women seemed to have no necks, just as if someone had dumped their huge meaty faces straight down onto the collars of their dirty pink cardigans. Or maybe their necks didn't like them and had run away and left them. The humans



had eyes that were tiny and cross-looking and the colour of bad-flavoured boiled sweets, and they were studying Badger Bill. He didn't enjoy being studied. It made him feel like homework, or arithmetic. Or dinner.

The woman with the meatiest head was wearing a yellow knitted hat with a purple flower in it, which didn't suit her. It wouldn't have suited anyone. She peered at Bill and growled, "Well, he's got spirit. Where did you catch him, Sister Maude, my pet?" Her voice sounded like dropping something ugly down a well.

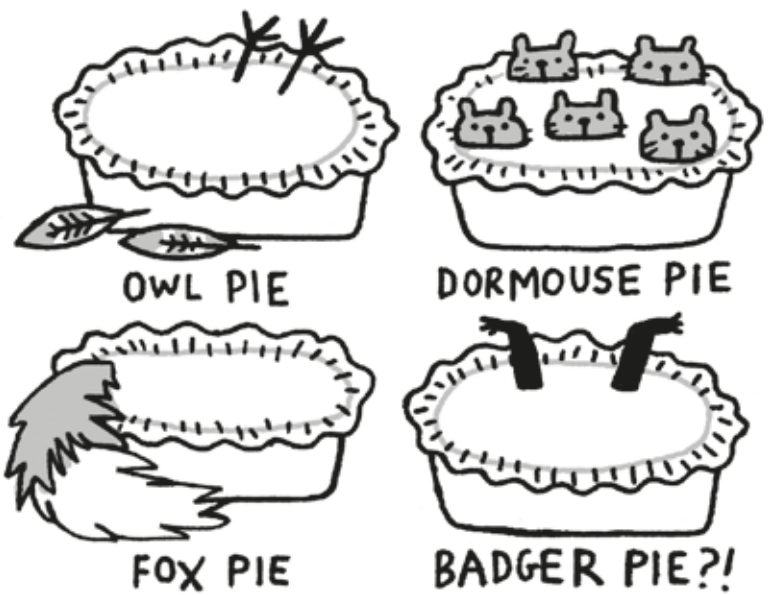
Sister Maude hissed, "Found him wandering about near the river, Sssissster Ethel, my ssssweet. He's not very big though, isss he?"

Badger Bill thought that not many creatures would seem remotely big near either Ethel or Maude – apart from maybe a very inflatable hippo. Even so, he tried to stand up straight and bristle out his fur. "I'm big for my age. Everyone says so."

"Oooh." Maude gave an extremely unpleasant hoot, as if she'd recently swallowed an owl alive, which Badger Bill suspected might be likely. "It can talk. That'sss unusssual in a badger." She didn't know that many of the animals she had

met, poked with sticks, pinched and shouted at during her long and spiteful life could have talked to her if they'd wanted to. The thing was that none of them *had* wanted to. "We should take advantage of that and make him give resssitationssss. Or, then again – we could make *piesss*."

Ethel nodded nastily and tweaked Bill's cheek between her great big dirty finger and her great big dirty thumb. "Indeed, Sister Maude. First we have the fight to prepare for. And afterwards … *pies*."



Bill didn't like the way Ethel had winked at him when she'd said pies. Bill also really hoped that when they talked about a fight they meant that Ethel and Maude were going to fight each other. He definitely didn't want them to fight *him*. He didn't want to fight anyone – he was a very peaceful badger.

Then Maude said something else worrying: "Yesss, I think the red shortsss will fit him." Bill hated shorts. They made his legs look stumpy.

Ethel kept staring at Bill with her eyes that were like old, bad eggs. It looked like she might be thinking and that thinking hurt her head, because it didn't happen often. Then she spoke. "The red shorts with the white stripe and the red boots. No gloves, of course…" Ethel giggled with the sound of plumbing gone horribly wrong and Bill knew that seeming to have stumpy legs was going to be the least of his problems.

Bill shuddered. "Ahm, you … er … lovely

ladies wouldn't be suggesting that I in any way should be involved in fisticuffs, would you? Me, myself, personally? Because I'm not a fighting kind of badger. I don't even like shouting."



Ethel and Maude grinned at him with their thick, greasy, left-over-sausage kind of lips. This made his whole tummy go cold.

"No, honestly. I'm allergic to shorts. And why no gloves, by the way? What if my hands get chilly, or I bang my knuckles against something hard?" Badger Bill swallowed and it felt as if he had a bit of unhappy sandwich stuck in his throat.

Ethel sucked in air between her long, brown teeth. "Of course you'll be good at fighting, dearie. Battling Badger Bob – that's you."

"Bill. My name's Bill," corrected Badger Bill. "William J. Badger, actually, if I'm filling out a form or something important. The J is for January, because that's when it's my birthday." The two women didn't look as if they wanted to know when his birthday was. And he suspected that they wouldn't be giving him a present – not even a single tiny present between the two of them.

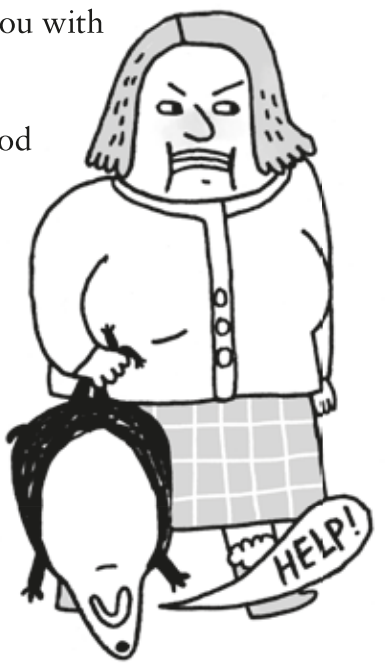
Ethel hit one of his soft, furry badger ears with the back of her hand. This stung him and made his head go twirly. "You'll be called Battling Badger Bob from now on, dearie, and don't you forget it."

Maude nodded. "The fight'sss on Sssaturday. Aren't you the lucky badger, then?"

Bill didn't feel lucky at all. This was Thursday night, which meant that he only had Friday left … and then it would be bad, bad, bad Saturday.

And he'd always liked Saturdays before this, so he thought it was a shame.

Maude leaned close to Bill while she spoke. His whiskers twitched with nerves and his sensitive nose tried to ignore her snaky breath, which smelled like drains and very, very old sardines. "Come along now," she said, and she picked him up by his back legs and started to carry him off upside down, his head swinging about beside her knees. "Time for bed. You'll need your ressst. Don't worry – we'll help you with your training."



Badger Bill felt the blood rushing to his ears – especially the stinging one – and tried not to let his nose brush against the stained hem of Maude's lime-green corduroy skirt. "Madam, this is

undignified! I could just walk! Please. This is all a mistake!" he shouted up at her.

But she only said, "*Madam*! *Madam*, indeed… Who doesss he think he isss, the Archbishop of Canterbury?" And she chuckled, which produced a noise like wet hens running into each other. And then she swung him back and forth a little bit harder.

Badger Bill thought of all the times in his life when he had sat up at night and worried himself about horrifying things that had never happened. Now he wished that he had saved his energy for today, when something horrifying really *was* happening and he didn't know what to do. He was a shy badger and hadn't made many friends at school. Since then he had kept himself to himself. Bill realized this meant that nobody would miss him, or notice that he'd gone – not even if he never, never, never came back home. He needed rescuing, but he was the only person who knew it. Bill tried not to cry, because he guessed that making handsome young badgers cry was one of Maude's favourite hobbies.



For the first time ever, Badger Bill realized that he felt lonely in each of his paws and every one of his whiskers and all the way into his heart, which was a good heart and full of good things. He folded his paws around his long badger nose and held tight and wished that he knew what to do and that someone would help him.