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Opening extract from

Burglar Boy

Written by

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Making the unloved loveable, Jackie Martin writes entertaining feel-good stories which are inspired by real-life characters and enjoyed by adults and children alike.

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Nightingale Books

NIGHTINGALE PAPERBACK

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In memory of my wonderful mother-in-law, here at last is 'Burglar Boy'.

To Emily, with love…

CHAPTER 1

Somebody's home! Dean's heart thumped fast and the bedroom floorboards creaked wherever he trod.

"Tina?" a man's voice boomed. "How come your car's not on the drive? – I thought you were at your mother's. Tina?"

After a long pause, Dean heard a click, then the voice resounded as a menacing growl.

"Who's there?"

Footsteps stomped up the stairs. Dean crouched and the jewellery jangled in his pockets. He crawled like a cat into the corner beside the dressing table. He curled up tight, pressing his back against the wall and silently cursing the sunshine that streamed through the windows.

Too soon Dean sensed a presence in the doorway. He held his breath. A large shadow loomed across the wardrobe.

He's seein' the open drawers, guessed Dean, *and the jewellery box!*

"Not again!" muttered the man.

Dean glimpsed him as he paced around the bed: a *giant* in shorts, white shoes and socks. Dean's eyes widened. Hairy, muscular arms wielded a golf club as if it were a sword.

"You've visited before, haven't you, you thieving scum. It's no use hiding. Show yourself. I've been very keen to meet you." With a thud the man dropped to his knees. Dean breathed out and snatched a noiseless gasp. The man viciously poked and thrashed at the air under the bed. Then he stopped and frowned. He had to lie on his belly to see for himself that nobody was there.

Now! Now! Now! thought Dean. He uncurled, sprang to his feet and in three leaps fled through the door. He didn't look back. He flew across the landing and down the stairs.

"You're not going anywhere!" The man's roar echoed off the walls.

Dean's fumbling fingers tried in vain to open the front door. *He's locked it! I'll 'ave to get out the way I came in!*

Tree trunk legs thundered towards him.

Dean darted towards the kitchen and knocked over a bag of golf clubs, which clattered across the hallway floor. He scrambled onto the kitchen bench. All the windows had security locks. Just the small window at the top remained open. He dived and wriggled his arms, his head, his chest through the gap. With a jerk his shirt got dragged backwards.

"Scrawny little schoolboy thief!"

Dean struggled, clawing at slippery glass and rough brick. *I'm done for!*

Suddenly, the shirt ripped and he shot forward.

"I'll teach you to steal from me!"

Shocking pains seared Dean's shins and made him yelp.

The man struck again and again. "You'll give it all back!"

"No I won't!" Dean kicked out wildly until his foot found the man's face. In the resulting moment of peace, Dean gave one last desperate wriggle and pulled himself outside. He fell to the ground. The garden spun as he forced himself to get up. He clutched his head and teetered on wobbly knees. *Come on, Dean! Pull yourself together!*

Through the kitchen window he saw the man reeling, holding his nose. Then bloodshot eyes focused and glared pure rage. Dean gulped. The man rushed from the kitchen and reappeared by the patio doors, pawing franticly at a ring of keys.

Dean limped away. He threw himself over the fence and into the alley. He stumbled and dodged through the fly-tipper's rubbish, the stained mattress, the rusty bicycle with one wheel, the upside-down shopping trolley. Dogs barked explosively at him from behind the gate at number 27. A black cat shrieked as he disturbed it from its resting place on

the brick wall around the corner. Dean scurried up the staggered brickwork to gain a view of the alley. *Oh no!*

That shiny bobbing head was coming ever nearer.

Bits of the wall crumbled and broke off underfoot as Dean raced along the top of it. He jumped and made an expert landing into the first of three super-sized wheelie bins that brimmed with waste from the Bells Court flats.

Among buzzing flies, Dean submerged deep under the rubbish bags. He screwed up his face at the stench of rotting meat, curry and nappy sacks. He blinked away the wetness from his eyes and concentrated on the approaching noises.

The man grunted and sobbed and cursed. "You'll give it all back, you hear me?"

Clang! Bash!

Pain pulsed through Dean's battered shins as he pictured the man lashing out with that golf club. *Walk past! Don't stop!*

Clong! Dean's bin jolted and he froze. At a squint he could make out part of the man's cheek through a slit in a bag. Dean barely breathed to minimize the rise and fall of his chest. *I'm invisible! I'm invisible!*

The man lingered there for endless seconds.

Does 'e know I'm here? worried Dean. Pins and needles began to tingle in his squashed left foot. *Is 'e tormentin' me on purpose?*

Dean listened to him pant. He imagined the enraged stare waiting for the slightest telltale movement. And now as if to seal his doom, Dean's upper body started to tremble. He closed his eyes, aware of the rubbish around him being prodded. A swarm of flies took to the air in a swirling frenzy. Dean felt the end of the golf club jab roughly into his ribs. *Don't move!* he told himself. *Stay quiet!*

Then suddenly, the prodding stopped. Dean's spirits rose as he listened to the man's grumbles and what sounded like a search of the other two bins.

An object thudded somewhere above Dean and the flies soon settled down to feast once more. He listened intently through their calmer buzzing.

At last he heard footsteps trudge away. He let out a silent sigh of relief and allowed himself to free his leg. *I sure won't be burglin' number 15 again!*

A minute's silence passed, then Dean rustled and crackled his way to the surface and peered over the rim of the bin.

CHAPTER 2

Dean checked the alley was clear then peeled off the remains of his shirt. He dumped it beside the wonky golf club on top of the rubbish heap and nodded with satisfaction. *He ruined his golf club. Serves 'im right.* Dean wiped his nose on his arm. He climbed out, hung, swung and dropped to the ground, then he slinked off through the alley and home to Herschel Heights at the end of Common Road.

Dean climbed the concrete stairway to flat 11C. He unlocked the door to be greeted by the usual dingy lounge and waft of stale smoke, but he crinkled his nose, sensing an unfamiliar trace of perfume.

As normal for lately, Mum snored like a purring tigress, sprawled across the sofa in the same yellow halter neck and tracksuit bottoms she'd been wearing for days. Dean quietly closed the door and tiptoed past her.

Sweet dreams, 'mother'.

Tangled grey-black hair draped over her haggard and pained expression. In the distant past she used to sit him on her knee and tell stories from the illustrations in the 'Giant Book of Children's Favourites'. Dean's chest heaved at the memory, looking now at the empty vodka bottle pressed against her cheek and her digital radio, a gift from her last boyfriend, Eric. Dean tentatively stepped through the minefield of fag packets, diet coke tin ashtrays and microwave dinner leftovers that littered the carpet.

He was about to reach the safety of his bedroom when he heard his brother cough. Dean opened the door to Callum's room instead and caught him smooching with a plump blonde in a mini dress.

Callum spun round and shoved him. "Knock first, you little runt!"

Dean glowered. *Why are you mean to me when you bring a girl home?*

Callum's room reeked of perfume and vinegar, and for the second time today Dean's nostrils tried to shrink.

The girl looked down her snout at him, as if staring at a mangey dog. She straightened her dress and pushed Callum to a respectable distance. "So, this is your baby brother, is it?"

Baby! Dean made himself taller. *I'm bleedin' eleven!*

"Yeah," grunted Callum. "This is Dean."

Dean patted his trouser pockets as a signal. Then Callum's eyes glinted and his frown disappeared.

"Have you been in a fight?" the girl asked.

Dean shook his head and flinched slightly.

"What 'appened to you then?"

Nosy as well as nasty, fat an' ugly! Dean followed her gaze to the grazes on his bare belly and arms, and to the horrible smears down his trousers, beneath which his shins throbbed raw. His mouth down-turned.

"Oh he's always gettin' into scrapes," explained Callum. "Fell down the stairs Tuesday. You're a walkin' disaster, ain't you?"

Dean nodded and old bruises hurt. Well, he remembered being *thrown* down the stairs Tuesday, at number 36, by an enormous startled woman fresh from the bath…

"Poor mite!" tutted the girl.

"Trish works at the chippy," Callum informed him, eyeing the remains of cod and chips spread out on vinegar-soaked paper across the bed.

"Yeah, there's sausage an' chips for you in the kitchen if you're hungry."

Dean perked up in an instant and looked at Trish in a whole new light. "For *me*? Cor thanks!"

"That's all right." She broke into a chuckle that wobbled her chubby cheeks. "I 'aven't met a kid yet who doesn't like sausages."

"Listen," said Callum, guiding Dean from his room. "Me and Trish have some talkin' to do. I'll see you later. Go clean yourself up. Eat your grub." He shut the door and Dean heard something being wedged against it.

Never mind gettin' clean! Once more, Dean crept past his snoozing mother. This time he entered the kitchen, cluttered with its usual filth: its chipped mugs and plates that had dried-on slodge, carelessly stacked and glued together; its neglected, spattered saucepans and the blackened, greasy grill. Dean finally spotted an oily parcel on top of the microwave. He smuggled the parcel into his bedroom and savoured the contents cold.

*

Dean stared down at his chest. *That man called me a scrawny little thief – and 'e was right.* He sighed, wondering how many years he'd have to wait till he was a big enough burglar to fight back. He flexed his arm muscles and mimed aggressively at the window. "You want a piece of me?"

At that moment Callum strode in.

Dean dropped his arms to his sides and his face heated. "Why don't *you* knock?"

"'Cause you're just a kid, that's why."

Dean glanced beyond him. "Has your girlfriend left?"

"Yeah." With smiling eyes, Callum nudged the door closed. "What've you got for me then, burglar boy?"

"Not much," Dean revealed the latest loot under his pillow. "Loads fell out of my pockets when I was tryin' to get away. I almost got caught again. This nutter attacked me with a golf club."

Callum emptied the best jewellery from Dean's rolled up red sock. He fingered through the gold items and held some to the light of the window to check for hallmarks. He didn't appear concerned until Dean hitched up his trouser legs.

Callum sucked in air and let out a low whistle. “Coo, this one meant business! Still, if he’d turned you in to the police, you could’ve done ’im for G.B.H. You could’ve taken *him* to court, eh?” He playfully cuffed Dean’s chin and provoked a brave smile. Dean let go of the trouser legs.

“The rings’ll be worth a few quid,” Callum sighed. “These pearls are fake. Might as well chuck ’em.”

“Give ’em to Trish. I loved my sausage and chips,” Dean said, rubbing his bloated tummy.

Callum thoughtfully tossed and caught the fake pearl bracelet then pocketed all the jewellery. He removed a five pound note from his slim wallet and passed it to Dean with a wink.

“When’s she comin’ round next?” asked Dean.

“Dunno.”

“Make it soon, will you? She’s a keeper.”

Callum laughed. “She’s a porker. But I can’t afford to be fussy.” As he turned to leave, Dean tugged his arm.

“Wait. Please. Will you check me for nits? I’ve been itchin’.”

Callum exhaled. “Come here.”

Dean gazed up at Callum’s handsome square jaw and boxer’s nose. *Wish I ’ad dark hairs on my upper lip!* His thoughts wandered from his own straggly straw-coloured thatch to Callum’s luxuriant brown mane, worthy of a photograph in the barbershop window. Dean winced. “Mind that bit! It’s sore.”

“Hold still.” Callum pinched a speck from Dean’s scalp and examined it closely. “Nah, a scab.” He flicked it away. “You’ve got to start takin’ better care of yourself.”

Dean stood, inwardly glowing from his brother’s attention. At moments like these he could even feel quite fond of him.

“There you go, you’re nit free. I’m off to the pub for a pint.”

“Take me,” Dean begged.

“Sorry, mate. Kids ain’t allowed.”

Dean's heart sank. Callum left the room and Dean pretended to focus on his crinkled fiver. *Kids can go in the Black Horse garden. There's a bouncy castle.*

Mum stirred on the sofa as Callum tramped past.

"Keep the noise down!" she exclaimed in an irritable, slurred voice.

"Ah shut up!" Callum slammed the flat door closed behind him.

"You shut up!" croaked Mum. She coughed, flipped herself over and buried her pointed nose in one of the cushions. Her precious radio fell to the floor and she resumed snoring.

A lump formed in Dean's throat. *Her drinkin's got out of control. What a state she's been since Eric dumped 'er!* Dean recalled her boyfriend's toothless grin, and how she'd wept after Eric had said his gormless goodbye. *She'll drink and sleep her life away if nobody stops 'er. And she won't listen to me.* Shoulders drooping, Dean retreated to his room.

Behind the closed door he stared at the rider on his motorbike poster. *When I'm Callum's age, I'll 'ave my own place – without her.* He sighed silent frustration. *Eighteen! That's ages away!*

He peeled back the Blu-Tack behind his poster to reveal the perfect hidey-hole he'd gouged in the plaster. Inside the hole snugly sat a faded 'Christmas variety biscuits' tin. He lifted the lid and lay Callum's meagre wage neatly on top of the wad, then he added the burglary cash from his pocket. *Every little helps.* He tucked his treasure away and replaced the poster.

Around seven o'clock in the evening, outside the window the sun shone high in the sky and Dean paced his threadbare carpet, at a loss what to do. A July heatwave guaranteed a whole town of open windows. He knew he ought to be out there, roaming Langley's streets, taking his chances. But his aching bones reminded him that he should rest. He sank onto the bed and gazed around at surroundings

as bleak as a prison cell. *The neighbours are quiet. I bet they're all out enjoyin' pub gardens.*

For several minutes the loneliness gnawed at him without mercy. Suddenly, Dean stood up and rifled through his drawer of crumpled clothes, seeking out his army camouflage T-shirt. Once found, he sniffed the armpits. *Bearable.* He determinedly pulled the T-shirt over his head and thrust his arms through the sleeves. Then, watching his step, he weaved through his mother's minefield and made his escape into the light.

CHAPTER 3

The Black Horse pub took less than ten minutes' walk through the council estate. Different reggae or Indian music blared from different houses. Dean could also hear children playing in back gardens everywhere, and the smell of barbecued burgers and sausages filled the windless air.

He gazed up at the sky beyond the satellite dishes on the rooftops. *Miss Durani said red sky at night makes shepherds alight… or somethin' like that.* He pictured her stern brown face, the one she used to stop him rolling his pencil, and he considered skiving another day off. *I hate Fridays. I hate every day at school!* He kicked a stone into the road and sniffed, swallowing his thoughts.

Dean became extra watchful as he neared number 15 Common Road. *Is the golfer at home?* he wondered with an ache in his shins. A blue Ford Escort was parked on the drive. *Is that his car or his wife's?* Dean slinked past, on his guard in case number 15's front door should suddenly fly open. Then, as soon as he felt he had stepped beyond the danger zone, he straightened his posture and took bolder strides.

Five minutes later, Dean was slithering like a snake through the hole in the prickly hedge at the Black Horse. Laughter resounded in the beer garden. Dozens of children filled the play area; clinging to the climbing frame, swinging on the swings, waiting in line for a go on the slide. Others gleefully sprang on the bouncy castle while their parents watched, seated at the tables under parasols, sipping beer or wine, chatting. Dean emerged behind the climbing frame and chose his moment to stand up and blend in.

Good. Nobody looked at me. He grabbed a bar and pulled himself up. Children with familiar faces carried on doing their own thing around him. He didn't know their names and he believed they had no wish to know his. At once

he spied Callum, sitting over there in his trendy Reebok top, with sunglasses nestled in his hair. He held a full pint next to two empty glasses and confided with his black Rasta friend, Tyrone, across the table, their heads almost touching.

Just then, a small girl near Dean slipped and clonked her chin. Her squeal hunched Dean's shoulders. He ducked as everyone, including Callum, glanced her way. When Dean dared to peek at his brother again, he had resumed his conversation.

Half dreading, half longing to be discovered, Dean dithered on the rope bridge. A boy he let past went to hang feebly from the monkey bars then flopped to the ground, frowning upwards.

Dean stirred into action. *I'll show 'im how it's done.* One arm over the other, though privately grimacing through his aches and pains, he swished from bar to bar to bar. From a table to the left he heard a man say,

"Watch the commando, Tom! There's the proper way to do it!"

And Dean's face brightened. *Commando! If that man was my dad, he'd be really proud of me.*

Dean continued to play among the other children but not with them, and he managed to keep an eye on Callum at all times. Despite the fading light, he noticed the discreet swapping of items and money beneath Callum's table.

Business as usual, Dean nodded to himself. *Tyrone'll give him a fair price.*

Shortly afterwards, Callum and Tyrone were joined by a pock-faced character who sported a pierced eyebrow and a bleached white electric-shock hairstyle. He wore a poser's vest under a linen jacket and sandals under linen trousers.

Pike! Dean's blood ran cold. *What's that slimeball doin' here?* An image came to mind of Pike outside William Hill's bookies, smiling and shaking hands with a couple of coppers.

"Hey medallion man!" Pike said to Tyrone. "How you hangin'?"

"I'm good. This here's my mate, Callum, the one we talked about."

"Ah! The famous Callum. We meet at last." Pike flashed his lizard smile and sat next to him.

Dean shuddered to see Pike mumbling so closely into Callum's ear. Callum nodded and checked over his shoulder. Then, although they went to the toilets together, Callum returned to the table by himself, giving a thumbs-up to the grinning Tyrone.

Dean bit his lip. *Oh Callum, what are you lettin' yourself in for?*

Gradually, the number of children in the beer garden began to dwindle. The toddlers had flaked out, either cradled in their parents' arms or propped in pushchairs. Tom, who couldn't hold onto the monkey bars, had been told to come. Dean watched him snatch a last sip of drink before he skipped after his mother and father through the exit. Dean's eyes focused keenly on Tom's glass. He noted the whereabouts of the barmaid as she collected empties from the tables. Trying to look casual, he sauntered over to Tom's drink. Dean picked it up, pretending it had been his all along and with eyes shut, poured the cool liquid down his throat. *Ah! Lemonade!*

"Last orders!" the barmaid announced.

Callum entered the bar, opening his wallet. His dreadlocked friend stayed at the table.

Out of the corner of his eye Dean noticed a flash of bling from Tyrone's turning chest. Dean swallowed and felt himself shrivel as he realised that Tyrone had fixed him with a curious gaze.

Has 'e caught me spyin' on Callum? Dean broke into a sweat and put down the glass. The next he saw of Tyrone, he was craning his neck towards the bar.

Dean sidestepped out of view behind the bouncy castle and crouched down. *Time to go.* He slinked across the grass and crawled into the hole in the hedge.

Dry leaves crackled, thorns scratched and twigs snapped beneath him. Yet, in spite of these, he could make out the rumble of Tyrone's voice.

"Hey Callum, you're being watched."

"Who by?"

"Some kid –"

"Where?"

Dean scrabbled through to the pavement and ran away.