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Opening extract from
Crongton Knights

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Published by
**ATOM an imprint of Little, Brown
Book Group**

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My mum told me I was named after her Scottish granddad, Danny McKay. Apparently, once a year, he served food to the best golfers in the world in some top-ranking hotel by the sea. I don't love golf but Mum was proper proud of her grandpops. She wanted to keep his surname so I was branded McKay Medgar Tambo. It's not the coolest of names but it smacks the insults out of the Gateau Kid, Slop Bag and Dumpling-Butt which I had to put up with in primary school.

My maths teacher, Ms Riddlesworth, reckons I'm fourteen and fifteen–sixteenths years old. I dunno how she worked that one out. I live in Dickens House, South Crongton estate, with my seventeen-year-old brother, Nesta, and my dad. Mum died a few years ago. Pops works the twilight zone in a biscuit factory. He drives a forklift truck in the warehouse. Going by his curses, he hates his boss.

My bredrens are Lemar 'Liccle Bit' Jackson and Jonah 'Rapid' Hani. I've known them long before anyone called me a nickname.

Six months ago, Liccle Bit had some serious drama with the top G of our estate, Manjaro. He couldn't quite keep out

of Manjaro's way cos the crime duke is the daddy to the baby of Bit's sis, Elaine – a bonkers situation. Bit made things a trailer-load worse for himself when Manjaro manipulated him to hide a gun. It was a time when beef between North and South Crong exploded with the merkings of at least three bruvv.

Bit was ordered to return Manjaro's gun. My bredren finally came to his senses and put up resistance. Him and his gran got a beat-down for his trouble but, since that day, Manjaro went all fugitive. The feds hunted him high and searched for him low. They couldn't find him. Graffiti in South Crong shouted 'Manjaro woz 'ere' and 'Manjaro woz there'. The feds and the social services offered Bit's fam a flat in Ashburton – they turned it down. Bit explained it was on the eleventh floor and in that tiny castle you couldn't swing a baby's dummy.

We all lived on a red alert. Feds patrolled around the tall slabs and the quiet alleyways. Teachers checked our lockers once a week. Security guards followed your steps in phone shops. Only two kids were allowed inside the Footcave store at one time. The local council wanted to open a new youth club in Crongton Broadway but the residents all signed a five-hundred plus petition. Even the popping of bubblegum made us jump. Most of our parents banned any missions out of the ends after dark. After a few nerve-jangling months the graffiti began to disappear. We stopped looking over our shoulders. Things were getting on the level once more. Bruvs and sisters started to chill again, soccer games booted off in the park, summer jams pumped out of ghetto blasters. A-class

chicks rolled by in their sexy denim cut-downs, big boots and check shirts – wannabe players had to smile away their put-downs. Gs spent their time smoking rockets in parked cars, balling in open-air basketball courts and counting their notes from dragon hip sales. But just a few weeks ago, a North Crong soldier got carved in the Crongton Movieworld car park. General Madoo was his name. Sixteen years old. His fam leaked tears on the 6 p.m. news. My dad and Bit's mum joined the 'Knives Take Young Lives' march to Crongton Town Hall. The mayor gave the world's most boring speech. Manjaro's name was whispered again. In North Crong, Major Worries, the King G in those ends, stirred up his crew. We became even more careful of our movements. Man! Living in Crongton has never been easy. I had no idea things were gonna get a world more dangerous . . .

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'Don't answer the door!' barked Dad from the kitchen, the washing-up suds popping on his grimy white vest.

'Mr Tambo!' a voice boomed from outside. It was deep. I imagined the owner of that tone strutting in the park with a rhino on a leash. 'We know you're in there! Let's be adult about this, Mr Tambo. Let us in so we can sit down and talk about your repayments. This is *not* going to go away.'

I breathed in a dose of pure fear. *Why are we in so much deep debt? Dad's working. Why won't he give me the full score on what's going on?* Dad dried his hands on the dishcloth and then draped it over his shoulder. He looked at my older brother, Nesta, who was standing in the hallway only a couple of metres from our drawbridge. Dad beckoned him to retreat. Nesta shook his head. I put my fork down on my plate. Suddenly, I didn't love my pasta and mince even though I had

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grated some cheese on top to nice it up. The letter box crashed again. My heart rumbled. 'Mr Tambo!'

Dad walked out of the kitchen and switched off the light in the front room. He gestured to Nesta again but Nesta took a step towards the door. I closed my eyes and willed for the men outside to go missing. I also prayed that Nesta wouldn't let loose his temper.

'Why are you scared of them pussies?' spat Nesta, glaring at Dad like he wanted to go head-to-head with the debt brothers outside. Dad raised his palms, trying to calm Nesta down. I could hardly bear to watch.

I strained my ears and could just about make out muffled conversations. Nesta took another stride forward. We all looked at each other. I sank half of my blackcurrant. When I placed the glass down I nearly knocked it over cos my hands were shaking. *Kiss my knights! Will evenings like this ever stop?*

'They're moving on,' said Nesta. 'Yeah, I can hear them bouncing down the stairs.'

My heart put its brakes on. Dad closed his eyes and let out a mighty sigh.

'Why do you let them chat to you like you're a pussy?' charged Nesta. He rolled towards Dad, taking his hands out of his pockets. I stood up from my chair and stepped between them. I didn't want them to be warring again. 'Stand up to them!' raged Nesta. 'Or go outside our gates and tell them to remove their grimy, money-sucking asses from our slab!'

'Nesta,' I called. 'They're gone now. Calm down, bro.'

Dad picked up the dishcloth, turned and entered the

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kitchen. I sat back down and pushed my half-eaten dinner away.

‘It’s not as easy as that,’ said Dad, resuming the drying of dishes. ‘I owe them a whole heap of money. I can’t afford to get myself into any confrontations that might make things worse. I have responsibilities.’

‘Why you owe so much money?’ I asked.

Nesta and Dad glared at each other. They didn’t give me an answer.

‘*Why don’t you two ever tell me a damn thing!*’ I raised my voice.

Dad stared at the floor.

Nesta flicked me a warning look. He was simmering now. ‘They shouldn’t be shouting at you through the letter box like you’re some kind of mouse! Like you’re a boy or something. I swear, if they slap on our gates again, I’ll deal with them myself.’

‘No you *won’t*,’ replied Dad. ‘You’re only seventeen . . . it’s *my* problem.’

‘Then deal with your problem instead of pussying out!’

I wished I could make them stop. They did this time after freaking time. I used to retreat to my dungeon and slam the door behind me but that made no difference. I was getting tired of them fighting and getting pissed with their stupid pact not to tell me what the freak was going on.

‘I’ll deal with it in my own way,’ said Dad. ‘I’m doing a lot more over time and—’

‘That ain’t gonna do zero nish!’ argued Nesta. ‘You need to tell ‘em you’re not paying the interest they slapped on your

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bill! Tell them to ram their interest where the number two hides!’

Dad took in another deep breath. He glanced at the ceiling as if he was asking God for some wise words. ‘I’m doing my best,’ he said.

‘Your best?’ Nesta repeated. ‘So hiding in the darkness like a freaking rodent is what you call your best? *Man up!* When are you gonna take your stance again?’

‘Nesta—’

‘I’m out of this damn place!’

Hot-stepping to his dungeon, Nesta collected his faded denim jacket. He then pulled back the curtain in the front room, opened the balcony door and picked up his bike. He wheeled it towards the drawbridge. Dad’s eyes followed him but he didn’t say a squawk. Nesta turned to me before he disappeared. ‘McKay, don’t stay up too late – you got school in the morning.’

‘I won’t,’ I said.

‘If I come back at mad o’clock and I see you playing games, I’m gonna kuff you in your head-corner . . . Me gone.’

‘*Nesta!*’ Dad suddenly called. ‘The police are stopping and searching teenagers on the estate since that kid got killed. Don’t—’

‘You think I’m fretting about the feds?’ interrupted Nesta. ‘I’m more worried that my pops ain’t got no heart.’

Dad had his faults but he didn’t deserve those lyrics.

Nesta slammed the door shut. Dad smacked his right palm against his forehead. He might as well have stamped on my nerves. Nesta gone. Again. And to who knows where, on his

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lonesome at night – it'd never been safe round here, but since the latest merking it'd been mental.

I picked up my plate and made for the kitchen.

'Can you get your brother's dirty plate from his room please?' asked Dad.

'Don't worry, Dad, I'll wash the rest of the tings up. You rest before you roll to work.'

'No, you cooked.'

'I'll do it,' I insisted. 'And please, Dad. Just tell me what's going on?'

'I don't want you fretting about it,' Dad replied. 'Just concentrate on your schoolwork.'

'But I'm nearly fifteen!'

'McKay! I *don't need* this now.'

Anger surged through me. I had to step off.

Nesta's dungeon was beside the bathroom. A bare-chested Tupac Shakur, the old-school hip-hop legend, overlooked his single bed. My brother had copied a tattoo on to his chest that Tupac had written on his back.

Only God Can Judge Me

His dirty plate was on the bedside cabinet beside his boom box – some phone-in show was broadcasting on a low volume. I switched it off. His wardrobe doors were open. Every time I saw Mum's clothes hanging up in there, something icy cold-footed through my veins. Dad wanted to give Mum's clothes to charity when she passed, but Nesta switched big-time when he heard that. That was one mother of an argument. By the time the bad lyrics between them were over, a window in Dad's room was blitzed and his clock radio was kissing

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the concrete ground far below. But Nesta got his way so here they were, Mum's nice blouses and skirts alongside his own garms.

There was a framed picture of Mum on his dressing table, angled in such a way that it was the first thing Nesta saw when he woke up. He asked me once if I wanted one, but no – it was hard enough trying to deal with Mum not being here let alone having her by my bed watching my every flex.

When I returned to the kitchen, Dad was staring into the sink as if he might find the meaning of life floating in the soap suds. 'I'll do the rest, Dad,' I offered once more. 'You get ready for work.'

Dad moved aside to give me room. He then turned around and forced a smile, the kinda messed-up smile that parents use to hide what's really going on behind the eyes. Whatever it was, I knew it was bad. The logs were about to spill over the toilet seat.

'I'm *still* gonna get you someting for your birthday,' Dad insisted. 'I promise that to the fullest!'

I started washing Nesta's plate, satnavving my frustration with a scouring pad. 'You don't have to—'

'I *do* have to!' Dad raised his voice. 'I'll find a liddle something from somewhere and get you a present.'

'Dad, please—'

His expression switched. His eyes narrowed and his eyebrows turned into a V shape. 'What you saying? That I can't provide a birthday present for my youngest son for his fifteenth? You think I'm that useless? Huh? Do you?'

'No . . . I didn't mean that, Dad.'

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'I hope not.'

Dad gave me a hard look and then glanced up at the ceiling again. 'I hope Nesta'll be all right out there,' he said after a while. 'There's too much badness on the estate nowadays. The feds *still* haven't found Manjaro, you know. The brother's wanted for not one but two murders and nobody'll say a ting. Someone must know what's become of him . . .'

A few weeks before Manjaro disappeared undercover, I'd seen him banging fists with Nesta in the park. When I asked Nesta about it he told me to seal my lips. I concentrated on the soapy water.

'What time did your brother come home last night?'

'I . . . I don't know.'

'I don't like him going out all hours, but if I put my foot down it'll only make tings worse. He doesn't listen to me anymore, McKay. You know how he is.'

Dad wasn't wrong. I knew how Nesta was.

I placed the plate on the drying rack. Dad looked at me again. This time there was a messed-up sadness in his eyes, like he just didn't know what to do any more. 'I'm gonna have a shower and take an hour's nap before I go to work,' he said. 'Don't stay up too late.'

'All right, Dad.'

'You got credit on your phone?'

'Yeah.'

'Remember, any liddle ting, just call me, OK. Or text. Don't kill out all your credit chatting to your school friends.'

'Yes, Dad, I know the deal.'

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An hour later, Dad was gone. I didn't go to bed. I parked at the kitchen table for a while and thought about Mum. If she were around she would've banged Dad and Nesta's heads together until they kissed and made up – but she wasn't and I was gonna have to face up to another night home alone cos Dad had to work and Nesta was hot-peddalling around the estate in a rage.

I didn't like to admit it to anyone but being left alone in our castle at night freaked the living kidneys out of me, especially with all the slayings going on in our ends. I was thinking of dinging Liccle Bit and Jonah just to hear a voice but I wanted to save my credit. Instead I played FIFA 14 on my PS4.

Tiredness must've licked me at some point cos something woke me at half three in the morning. My game was on pause but the TV was humming. It was shadowy. I heard footsteps.

'McKay! What's a matter with you?'

Nesta! He was home and standing watching me in the darkness.

'Don't you do any frigging thing I tell you to?' He sounded proper angry. He must've had a hard-lick night. His tone was fierce – it definitely woke me up.

'Where's your bike?' I asked, sitting up.

'Why aren't you in bed? What did I tell you before I rolled out? You're asking for a kuff in your freaking eardrums. Get your big ass to bed before I—'

'Where's your bike?' I cut in again.

I jumped up and switched on the front room light. Nesta flinched and squinted. His bottom lip had swollen to the size of a hovercraft's bumper, blood was trickling down from his forehead and his left eye looked all mangled.

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'What happened to you?' I asked.

'You have good hearing, right?' Nesta asked.

'Er, of course,' I replied.

'Then you must've heard what I said. Get your butt into your bed. *Now!*'

I didn't bother packing my PlayStation away. I just scrambled to my dungeon and shut the door behind me. I lay on my bed fully clothed, quiet and still. I heard Nesta clattering about in the bathroom. I turned to face my poster of Usain Bolt. I'd pinned it right above my headboard. 'Another crazy day in the Tambo castle, Usain,' I said to him. 'Not sure of how much more I can take.'

I don't know what time sleep finally caught up with me but it must've done because next thing I knew I was being woken up by someone rocking my shoulder. I tried to open my eyes but sleep was putting up a damn good fight. A heavy hand rolled me again. I forced my eyes open a fraction, enough so I could just make out Nesta. He had slapped a plaster on his forehead, his left eye was the size of a ping-pong ball and his bottom lip still looked like it could save refugees in a mad sea.

'McKay! Wake up, bruv!'

I sat up a little, wiped my eyes and checked my mobile on my bedside cabinet. Quarter to six.

'What's a matter with you, Nesta?'

'Delete your noise and listen up,' he ordered.

He looked proper serious so I shut up.

'I have to go missing,' he said.

'Why?'

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'I got caught up in a feud tonight and I don't want Pops to see me like this. I wrapped untold ice cubes in my flannel but the damn swelling won't go down. He's gonna go all *Question Time* on me how my face got mashed up.'

'Where you gonna go?'

'You don't have to know. But I have to keep a low profile. I got involved with one of Major Worries' crew.'

'Major Worries!' I sat bolt straight. The hairs on my arms stood to attention. My heart started to pound. I glanced at Nesta's right hand and I could see his knuckles were bloodied and grazed. 'Spill the score!'

'You don't need to know the whole deal,' said Nesta. 'Just keep your backside in our ends and *don't* tell Dad zero squat. I *mean* it. You hearing me?'

'No one tells me sweet zero around here!'

'McKay! I don't need to stress about you as well! As I said, *don't* spill a drop to Dad. I need your help on this one.'

I stared at him hard but finally nodded. 'So what do I tell him?'

'Tell him ...' Nesta paused. 'Tell him I'm staying with a chick.'

'What chick?' I wanted to know.

'It doesn't matter what chick!'

'All right! Keep your plaster on.'

'I'm missing again,' Nesta said, turning around. 'And I don't know when you'll see my ass next.'

'Will you text or ding me so I know what's going down with you?'

Nesta offered me an angry look. 'What am I? A rolling

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freaking news channel? You'll hear from me when the time is good.'

The time was never good with Nesta.

He closed the door gently behind him, as if Dad were listening to his movements. I lay back. Home alone. Again.