

Badger the Mystical Mutt



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For Rosemary Boiteux

ALSO BY McNICOL AND JACKSON

Badger the Mystical Mutt and the Barking Boogie

Chapter One

It was a quarter past midsummer. In a garden, next to a lane, Badger the Mystical Mutt was feeling rather pleased with himself.

At last, he had gathered all the ingredients for his fabulous new spell to conjure up his favourite treat — a higgledy-piggledy tower of toast.

“This is great,” he thought smugly.

Sparkles of light appeared around his tail. Badger bounced around in a circle and shimmied his bottom.

*“Buttercups and sun scorched grass,
Do for me this easy task.
Take this bread and make it roast.”*

Turn it into buttered toast,” whispered Badger and closed his eyes.

He waited. All was quiet.

Too quiet.

Then, Boom! Crack! Bang!

“Oops!” said Badger, feeling his eyebrows smoulder. He opened one eye nervously to see a pile of burnt crumbs in front of him.

“Not quite as I’d planned. I need to practise that one. Time for a lie down.”

Badger fell quickly into a deep sleep and dreamt of hot toast dripping with butter.

Suddenly, a breeze lifted a scrunched up ball of paper and dropped it squarely on Badger’s nose. He jumped from his slumber and shook his head. A



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tattered old newspaper lay on the grass beside him.

Badger sighed and smoothed out the newspaper with his large paws. The Big Folk would get the news a lot faster if they used pee-mail, he thought. A lift of the leg on a lamppost and the neighbourhood knew everything, smiled Badger to himself.

He peered at the pages.



That's Hamish, he thought, as he spied a large picture of a floppy-eared spaniel with the

headline: 'Local mutt favourite to win *Pet Idol* contest'. And there's Top Dog and his gang, he frowned, spotting a large 'Wanted' poster on the opposite page.

Top Dog would not be happy. He and his gang had been fleeing the Dog Catcher for a long time. I smell trouble ahead, thought Badger.

Meanwhile, in the lane at the bottom of the garden, all was not well. Hamish was running for his life. Hot on his heels was Top Dog, leader of the lane and all-round bruiser. Hurtling along behind him was his ferocious gang of five: Pogo Paws, Pickle, Dodgy Dave, Snif and Lennie.

Hamish raced like he never had before. He passed ladders and old paint tins, dodged bicycle bits, brushes and shovels and ploughed through messy piles of freshly mown grass.

He could hear the gang getting closer and closer. His heart pounded and his chest heaved. He had to do something to slow them down.



Up ahead, he spotted a crate of rotting fruit. That might stop them in their tracks, he thought.

He sprinted faster towards the crate and threw his whole weight against it. It tilted and toppled behind him. Squidgy oranges, apples

and bananas littered the lane. Hamish drew breath. The gang fell flat on their backs and thrashed angrily on the ground.

“Pooperscoopersmellysnooper,” yelled Top Dog pointing at the *Wanted* poster on the lamp post. “Thanks to you and your *Pet Idol* rubbish, the Dog Catcher is on the prowl. The competition is coming to town, so he wants to round up all the strays.”

“We’ll make sure you *never* win *Pet Idol*,” snarled Snif.

“Fancy Pants thinks he’s a Smarty Pants now,” growled Dodgy Dave.

“Get him!” they screamed, scrambling to their paws.

Uh oh, thought Hamish. Here we go again.

He took off at speed, heading this time for a pile of silver bins at the far end of the lane.

There’s nothing else for it, he winced, but a full-on collision.

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Hamish dived at the bins, sending them flying. As they clattered and clanged, bumped and banged, the gang scattered.

All was quiet.

Hamish found himself flat on the floor under a big, black lid.



I feel like a turtle, he thought to himself.

Hamish picked himself up and crawled tentatively onwards with his bin-lid shell.

This is an amazing disguise, he thought, but it's a bit dark. He tripped and came face to

face with a big wooden fence.

Top Dog and his gang were nowhere to be seen.

“Phew!” Hamish breathed a sigh of relief as, looking round, he spotted a gaping crack in the fence. He shook off the bin lid and put it down carefully.

Now *that*, thought Hamish, feeling pleased with himself, could be a useful hiding place for any more scuffles with Top Dog and his gang.

He peered through the crack and spied a big black lump of snoring fur.

Is that Badger the Mystical Mutt? wondered Hamish.

He narrowed his eyes and caught sight of Badger’s famous red-spotted neckerchief.



It was him! Some said you could see sparkles of light around him and that he

was quite, quite magical. And others said he saw things *differently*.

Badger scratched his head with his paw, his nose twitched and he sniffed the air around him. Then he trotted to the garden fence, jumped on to his hind legs and peered into next door's garden, staring hard at whatever was on the other side of the fence.

His ears pointed forward and sparkles of light appeared around his big rubbery nose. Just then a freshly baked smell wafted towards Hamish and he saw a pile of toast float over the fence.

"I'm still working on that landing," said Badger to the toast, as it nose-dived sharply to the ground.

"Fetch!" said Badger to no one in particular.

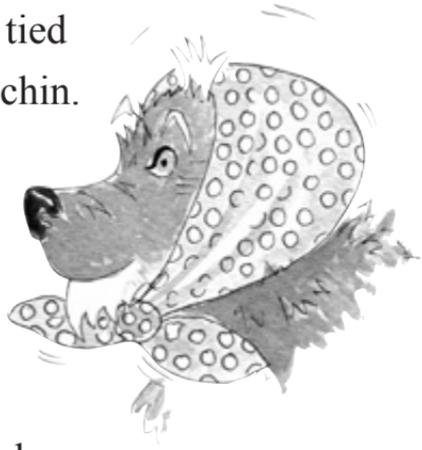
Suddenly, Badger's neckerchief unravelled and shot across the garden, scooped up the toast and dropped it into Badger's bowl.

“Nice one, ’Chief,” said Badger.

The neckerchief swirled around, opened out, covered the top of Badger’s head in a pretty headscarf and tied itself in a knot under his chin.

“Not quite as I’d planned,” said Badger, “but thanks for the toast.”

“Supersnackarooony!” shouted an excited Hamish, giggling. “Now I know why the others call you *magical*.”



Badger looked around sharply, startled by the voice behind the crack in the fence, and more than a little embarrassed.

Just then, Hamish heard the sound of heavy paws beating their way towards him. Top Dog and his gang were back on his tail.