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opening extract from

Paradise End

written by

Elizabeth Laird

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'What's it going to be, Lauren, a slap or a kick? Or are you going to move that stuff and shut that noise up and let me get on with my tap?'

That's me talking to my little sister, and don't feel sorry for her. Listen to the next bit.

'Mum!' shrieks Lauren. 'Carly's hitting me! Mum! It's not fair!'

'I am not hitting you, you little slug.' I'm so irritated my face is sweating now. 'But I will if you don't shut up. At *once*.'

It's too late. The door opens and Mum's there.

'Carly, not again.' She sounds as if she's pulled me off Lauren six times in the last hour, which she hasn't. 'Can't you two play nicely together for once?'

'Excuse me.' I am as cold as ice. 'I am not *playing*. I do not *play*. I'm trying to practise my steps, which, if you will remember, Mrs Litvinov asked me to do every day. And I never touched Lauren. She's such a little liar, she wouldn't know the truth if it wore a bright-green costume and jumped out of her breakfast cereal.'

I'm quite pleased with that, but it doesn't impress Mum. She's hugging Lauren now, who is snivelling (or

pretending to) and looking triumphantly out at me over Mum's arm.

'I've had it up to here with you, madam.' Mum's shaking her forefinger at me, and it's so unfair that I kick the leg of my bed and make a nasty scuff mark on my beautiful right tap shoe.

Then she takes Lauren out of the room, and I know she's going to give the little beast a drink and a biscuit in the nice cosy kitchen. And my head's fizzing with fury, and my fists are itching to punch someone, and my feet are twitching with frustration. So then I fling open the window and I turn up the music (I don't care what the old misery next door thinks) and I start my tap.

Clickety clack, clickety clack, clickety clickety clack clack clack.

I'm good today. All that anger's given me energy. The buzz thrills from my brain clean down my spine and through my legs into my dancing feet, and they're going strong, tapping and clicking on the floorboards, forwards and backwards, every stroke perfect, just this once.

Wish Mrs Litvinov could see me now, I'm thinking. I'd be up for the display. But then the door crashes open and it's Mum again. She storms over to the window, slams it shut, marches to the stereo and switches it off.

'You *know* poor old Mavis next door is poorly and sleeps in the afternoon,' she rages. 'How can you be so inconsiderate?'

'Easily,' I say, 'when people don't give any consideration to me. All I ask – *all* I ask – is a bit of space to practise in.' I know I've been mean to Misery Mavis so I rush on. 'Look at the floor, Mum. Look at it. The minute I start, what does Lauren do? Spreads her rubbishy Barbie

gear all over it, and screams the house down if I dance within five miles of it. Anyway, for your information, I didn't hit her. I told you before. She's a lying little toad.'

Mum heaves a sigh.

'It's only till September. When Sam goes off to college you'll get your own room. I know it's not easy, Carly, sharing a bedroom when you're nearly fourteen, but you could at least try to be nice to Lauren. After all, she's only . . .'

'Eight years old. Lauren's age is something I know, Mum, although thanks for reminding me. Why do I keep thinking she's only four? Or three? Barbie dolls. I mean, give me a break.'

And I lash out at all those revolting little glitzy dresses and sparkly pink miniature handbags and tiny sequinned sweaters with a sweep and a click-clack of my black shoe, and now there's a decent empty space on the floor, and I can get started again, if anyone will let me, on my practice.

'I'll keep the volume down, promise,' I say, reaching for the button on the stereo. 'Please, Mum. I've got to get on. Mrs Litvinov's selecting for the display this Saturday. She says I'm up for it, if I get my brushes right.'

'Saturday. Yes.' Mum takes a deep breath as if she's about to get something off her chest, but she doesn't get the chance because Lauren's poked her weaselly little face out from behind her.

'I'm coming with you on Saturday,' she says. 'Mum says I can. I'm starting in the junior class with Miss Tideswell. We're going to buy the shoes at Quicksteps after school on Friday. Mum says we can.'

I honestly can't remember what happened next. That's the thing about anger, fury, rage – call it what you like. It wipes your mind of everything else. I got that wild feeling in my head, and I said things and yelled and threw stuff.

And then I'd thrown off my tap shoes, and wrenched on my trainers and was out of the house, out in the street, just needing to be on my own, with space round me, and time to let the heat go off, and the jangling nerves all over my body start to calm down.

I didn't care where I was going. I ran up the road, past poor old Mavis's and all the other boring semis at the crummy end of our village, desperate to get away.

I don't know about you, but for me, if I'm angry, the best thing is to go off somewhere, to get right away and cool my head. I need to be on my own. That's the problem with rushing out of the house. Anyone seeing me storming up the road that afternoon, muttering to myself and waving my arms around, would have thought I was a total fruitcake. They'd have called for an ambulance, probably.

But by the time I was halfway up the hill I was over the worst of it. I usually do calm down quite quickly, as a matter of fact. So when I reached the top, I was able to forget about Mum and Lauren and Miss Tideswell for a moment, and look through the bars of the old-fashioned wrought-iron gates, which stand like sentries at the top of our street, and are so tall you can see them from right down the bottom of the hill.

I've done that – looked through those gates, I mean – since I was a baby in my pushchair, before I could walk and long before I could spell out the words carved into

the massive gate pillars: 'Paradise' on the left one, and 'End' on the right.

How can I describe Paradise End to you? Words mightn't be enough. If I call it a stately home, you'll think of something huge, like a palace or a castle. If I call it a big house, you'll probably imagine something too small and ordinary. Well then. Paradise End is a stately home, but a little one.

Once, it must have stood in lonely splendour on the crown of the hill, with the village tucked away in the valley bottom below. But the village grew and grew, and modern estates like ours crept up the hill till they reached all the way to the gates.

The house is about 200 years old, and it's got a big front door in the middle, between a couple of long, elegant windows, and then the walls bulge out on each side to make two large bays, with three long windows in each one. There are about nine windows running along the upstairs floor, and they're a bit shorter than the ones below.

That doesn't tell you much, does it? I'd like you to do what I've always done, hold the bars and peer round to the right of the house, to glimpse what's obviously the end of a stone terrace going along the side, and the long lawn that slopes away from it towards a fringe of old giant beech trees, and then look left to the row of garages running alongside the drive near the gates. They must have been stables once, I suppose. There are little windows sticking out of the roof above, because there are flats up there. But even if you can imagine that, it's not enough. It doesn't tell you about the feel of the place, its mystery and

beauty and strength. It doesn't tell you that Paradise End is the sort of place that starts you making up stories in your head, that makes you stop and look and dream.

It was almost better a few years ago, when it was no more than a wreck. There were weeds shooting up out of the drive running up to the front door, and bushes sprouting out of the roof. The lawn was like a field, with really long grass, and the flower-beds had disappeared. It had a quiet, old, romantic, dreamy look to it then.

A rich old miser was supposed to have lived there once. People said he'd quarrelled with everyone and become a hermit in the end. We used to make up stories about him to scare the infants. We'd tell them he'd murdered his wife and eaten his kids and shot at the postman with a big shotgun.

Last summer, though, everything changed. The padlock came off the gates and workmen moved in. They painted all the ironwork a shiny black, and the drive was cleaned up with new gravel, all sharp and glittery. The grass was a lawn again and the flower-beds were weeded. The house was a dazzling white now, and there were a couple of miniature trees in white tubs, one on each side of the front door, standing to attention like little soldiers. The sun sparkled on the freshly washed windows, and you could see that there were new curtains inside, thick heavy ones, tied back with fancy ropes.

You might think that this is a bit weird of me, but in my heart of hearts I've always dreamed about Paradise End, and in my dreams it always belongs to me and I'm the mistress of it all. When I was younger, I used to imagine that I'd been swapped at birth, or found by my parents in

a Moses basket, and that one day someone would knock at our front door and announce that I was the rightful owner of Paradise End, and hand me a silver key on a velvet cushion.

I'm more realistic now. A bit more anyway. I know that Mum's my mum, and Dad's my dad and that in this life no one hands you anything on a plate. In my dream it's me who makes things happen. I can see myself from the outside. I'm dancing somewhere in the open and the world's most famous impressario drives past and sees me, just by chance, and he stops his chauffeur and tells me I'm the greatest. Then he whisks me off to Hollywood and stardom. I come back in a blaze of diamonds and buy Paradise End. Only then, when it's truly mine, do I open the front door and walk inside and take possession of the rooms one by one, and discover all that's inside them.

I loved that part, imagining the rooms and all the things in them. And sometimes I played out little scenes in my head, like there were vanloads of flowers arriving at the front door, sent by all my fans, or I was kindly letting the most stuck-up girls from my class at school come to tea, or I was on the phone saying, 'No, Lauren, you certainly cannot bring Francine and Darren to play here, and if I ever catch you hanging round my gates again I'll get the butler and the footman and the chauffeur and the housekeeper and the dogs on to you so fast you won't know what's hit you.'

Anyway, as I stood there that afternoon, I was imagining myself giving a ball, wearing a fabulous ball-gown, and sweeping down the grand staircase, into the arms of the most stunning man in the world, while Lauren was

carried away kicking and screaming down the drive. That made me feel a bit better, and I turned away to walk down Church Lane (it runs down to the left of the big gates along the wall of Paradise End into the old, middle part of the village).

I'll go for a really long walk, I thought. And I won't get home for hours and hours. Mum'll get dead worried and maybe she'll realize for once how upset I am.

And then the most amazing thing happened. I'd only gone a couple of steps, when a shy voice behind me said, 'Hi.'

I looked round, but I couldn't see anyone, so I walked on, but then the same voice said, 'Hello, I'm in here.'

Then I saw her. There was a girl standing inside the big gates, holding a tennis racket in one hand and one of the uprights of the gate in the other. She was about the same height as me, and slim with long, honey-coloured hair. She was wearing jeans and a tight-fitting pink top, so I could see she was even flatter than me in front, if such a thing is possible, though I guess we were the same age.

'Sorry,' she said, sounding shyer than ever. 'My tennis ball's gone under that red car. You couldn't fish it out for me, could you? It's such a pain opening the gates. They always shut on me and lock me out.'

I just stood and stared. She'd given me an awful shock. I suddenly saw, painfully clearly, how silly all my dreams had been. For the first time, I suppose, I realized that Paradise End must belong to someone else. It must have real owners, real people, who had a right to live there.

I was all set to hate the girl straight off, especially when the poshness of her voice had started to sink in. No one I

knew, no one round our estate or at my school, ever sounded like she did. I thought she must be taking the mickey, and I was just about to say, 'Sorry, I haven't got time. I'm in a hurry,' when I noticed the anxious crease in her forehead, and saw her eyes.

I'd never seen eyes that colour before. They weren't either blue or green, but somewhere in the middle. You see that colour sometimes when shallow sea-water runs over white sand, or when the sky is very clear on a winter afternoon. As a matter of fact, they were the most extraordinary eyes I'd ever seen. They only looked at me, though, for a moment, before she dropped them from mine, but I'd seen a sort of pleading in them.

'Which red car?' I said. 'There are hundreds out here.'

'That one.'

She pointed her racket towards a lumbering old Toyota, the longest and widest car in the street, as luck would have it.

I bent down. The ball was new and bright yellow, so I saw it at once, lodged behind the back wheel. There was another one further in, harder to reach. I had to get down on my hands and knees and stretch my arm out as far as it would go. I dislodged the ball with my fingertips and it rolled towards the other one by the back wheel. I pulled myself back from under the car, and picked them both up.

'Two of them,' I said. 'Are they both yours?'

She put her hand through the bars and I put the balls into it.

'I expect so. I lose hundreds when I'm practising my backhand. You are an angel.'

We stood there awkwardly, looking at each other, and I

remember thinking right then that we couldn't have been more different. She was blonde and sleek, perfectly groomed, her clothes fitting like a skin, her hair cut by a genius, her voice as posh as a princess's. I'm tall too, but I'm all elbows and knees, Mum says, bony and skinny, and my short black hair sticks out over my ears and forehead in spikes whatever I do to it. If I wear tights, they always get holes in them. If I wear a top tucked into my jeans, it always comes flying out. I was ready to hate her again, partly for looking as if she could go through a car wash and come out the other side as perfect as when she went in, but mostly because she was living in my dream, my Paradise End.

I said, 'OK then. Bye,' and I started to move away.

'Bye,' she said softly, but then, when I'd only gone about five steps, she called out, 'You wouldn't like a game of tennis, would you? It's hopeless trying to practise on one's own.'

I stopped and turned back. The meaning of what she'd said, the idea that I might actually be able to walk through those gates, that had been shut against me all my life, was making my heart jump about inside my chest.

'I'm useless at tennis,' I said, feeling breathless. 'I always whack the balls into the net when we play at school.'

She laughed awkwardly.

'Oh. Do you – I mean, would you like to come and see the tennis court anyway? It might inspire you or something.'

I'd never thought I was much good at reading people's minds, and I was all taken up with my own feelings, but I

could tell that she was lonely. It stuck out a mile. She might have been grand, and rich, and have brilliant clothes, but the cards weren't all stacked on her side. I had something she wanted, that I could give or keep back: company.

'OK,' I said, trying to sound casual. 'Just for a bit. I can't stay long though.'

Then she pressed a hidden button on the inside of one of the pillars, and the gates swung open, and I walked through them, into her life.