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Opening extract from

# The Great Ice-Cream Heist

Written by

**Elen Caldecott**

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# CHAPTER 1

The boy lay on top of the shed roof with his arms and legs splayed. He wore a T-shirt with a huge face on the front. If Eva scrunched up her eyes, his pale limbs spread against the black background looked like a pirate flag. Though if she unscrunched her eyes, he just looked like a boy hiding from the fighting going on beneath him.

He hadn't spotted her watching him.

From her bedroom window, Eva could see the gardens behind the houses, all joined together. Hers and the boy next door's.

Her own garden was neat and ordered. A shed, a swing, borders that ran around the grass like a picture frame. There was a scuffed brown scab of earth beneath the swing that Dad sighed over.

Next door was different.

It was a hot people soup. She could see five people in shorts and T-shirts sweating on plastic chairs. The space was small, but they crowded in like sardines in sportswear. Dotted around the concrete yard were plants and dogs, all drooping in the heat. Bottles and ashtrays and magazines filled the rest of the space, as though every single centimetre had to be used to make it worth paying the rent.

Two young men were wrestling. The people sitting on the chairs yelled encouragement. It wasn't clear who was winning.

The boy on the shed roof ignored them all.

He was lying starfished in sunshine, his arms and legs spread out to catch the warmth. He lay still, as though the adults were nothing to do with him. As though the other McIntyres weren't his business at all.

The McIntyres had moved in next door about a month ago. They had arrived in a white van and a torrent of noise. Their furniture came in drips and drops all day, the little van driving back and forth, bringing their stuff from wherever they'd lived before.

Eva had watched them. Once or twice Dad had told her to mind her own beeswax, but she hadn't been able to stay away.

New neighbours was the first interesting thing to happen in a long time. And Eva had wanted to know

about these new people. There was a mum and a dad and lots of boys. She hadn't been sure which of the boys were staying and which were just helping with the move. There were dogs too, two of them with wide jaws and wider shoulders. She had watched them all. Watched and watched until the street lights came on.

Dad had been quiet, staying at the back of the house, in the kitchen, or out in the garden. When she'd asked why, he'd just scowled and said 'McIntyres', as if that explained everything.

Eva soon learned what he meant.

In the garden below, the two wrestlers spun around hard. One flailed for a second, like a cartoon character trying to stay in mid-air, then he fell heavily against a chair. The woman who had been sitting in it, Mrs McIntyre, spilled to the ground. She leapt up, yelling. Soon, the whole lot were in uproar, blaming each other, laughing, shouting. The party moved indoors and Eva heard the thump of bass as music started. It would probably carry on into the night.

On the shed roof, the boy opened his eyes and grinned.

Eva leapt back.

Had he seen her spying?

# CHAPTER 2

Outside, the sky was beginning to turn pink. The thud of bass still came through the wall. Eva's dad threw himself back on to the sofa as though he were falling on to a bouncy castle. The sofa, which was not a bouncy castle, harrumphed in alarm. Or, at least, that's what the noise sounded like to Eva.

'The sofa will leave home if you keep treating it like that,' Eva said.

'Will it?' Dad grinned.

'Yup.' Eva pushed her beanbag even closer to where Dad sat. 'It will pack its suitcase and go. You'll see it getting the number 56 bus into town and that will be that. You'll have to sit on the floor.'

Dad laughed. Eva could always make Dad laugh, even if he was having a sad day.

'Well, I'll try to be nicer to the furniture then. We

don't want to live in an empty house. So, what have you been up to today? Did you have a good time with Jaclyn?'

Jaclyn was Gran. Eva always spent the school holidays with Gran while Dad was at work. Well, always since two years ago. But Eva didn't let that thought get too close; she punched it on the nose before it could properly form. Her day today, that's what Dad had asked about. They had done a grocery shop in the morning, then some dusting and a telly programme about moving abroad. She could do better than that for Dad though.

She tilted her head back to look at him. His eyes were closed and his eyelashes rested on his cheeks like tiny brushes. But he was definitely listening. She could tell by the way a corner of his mouth was tilted up.

'Well,' she said. 'As you know, I was woken by the sound of the town siren calling in all the superheroes. I flew down to police headquarters in time to find a mass jailbreak had the citizens in terror. Luckily, I trapped the escaped convicts in the town hall. Once they were all inside, I used my superpowers to stop time while the police went in to round everyone up.'

Dad was smiling properly now. The lines at the side of his mouth looked like lots of brackets from where Eva was sitting.

'Did you, now?' he said.

Something banged next door, maybe a door being slammed.

Eva let her head drop on to the edge of the sofa. She wished she *had* had a superhero kind of day. Suddenly she felt a bit sad. It happened like that sometimes. She could be in the middle of laughing and making up stories for Dad, and then the blues would come.

Dad seemed to notice her change of mood. She felt his hand come to rest on the back of her head. The last rays of sunlight spilled in through the open blinds and cast shadows like prison bars across the floor.

'What should we do this evening?' Dad asked. 'Game of Boggle? Or maybe a bit of *The Only Book in the World*?'

*The Only Book in the World* was Dad's joke. It was what he called *The Twits*. She knew it off by heart. Which was why she always read it. Every other book was too hard. The words in them were like barcodes and her scanner was on the blink. *The Twits* was safe.

Eva didn't think it was a funny joke. She drew her legs in and tucked her knees tight to her chest.

'We can play Boggle with two-letter words if you like,' Dad said.

'You'll still win.'

'I'll give you a ten-point head start?'

Eva flipped over on her beanbag so that her face was buried in the beans and her bum stuck up in the air. Doing an ostrich.

'Eva?' Dad laughed.

Even deep in the beanbag she could feel her bottom lip sticking out. Mum used to call it a slug-sulk because it was like having a slug stuck to her face. Mum would tease her about having creepy-crawlies on her chin until Eva laughed and the slug-sulk was gone.

'Like that is it?' Dad asked. 'Don't worry, Ladybug, it was just a thought. How about a takeaway and a bit of telly instead?'

The lip-slug vanished and Eva smiled. That sounded much better.

'Chinese?' she asked.

'Chinese. Should I get the menu, or do you want the usual?'

'The usual.'

Outside, someone shouted and a car squealed away.

Dad slipped his phone from his pocket. 'Your wish is my desire,' he said. His arm stopped in mid-air, the phone held up like an Olympic torch. 'Oh, but we have to wait a bit. Your gran's coming over. She has something she wants to talk about.'

'What?' Eva asked.

‘I don’t know,’ Dad frowned a little. ‘She sounded a bit serious on the phone.’

Eva felt a flutter of panic in her chest, like moths beating against a light bulb. Dad must have noticed.

‘Don’t fret,’ he said. ‘I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about. I’m sure it’s nothing at all.’

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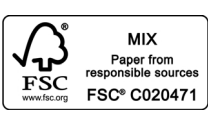
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