

BLACK HOLE CINEMA CLUB

CHRISTOPHER EDGE

nosy crow

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For Chrissie, Alex and Josie





"…the speed of light, the flickering stuff of cinema,
is the only constant in the universe."

Mark Cousins, *The Story of Film*



1

We meet at the Black Hole.

I'm five minutes early, but Ash is already there, standing in the shadow of the cinema marquee. Between its black horizontal lines, the bright red letters emblazoned on the sign remind me what lies ahead.

BLACK HOLE CINEMA CLUB
11AM SATURDAY 25 JUNE
ALL-DAY MOVIE MARATHON

The sign used to say "BLACK *HILL* CINEMA CLUB", but the "I" in "HILL" fell off years ago and a graffiti artist with a sense of humour and a head

for heights did the rest. Now everybody calls it the Black Hole – even the new owners.

Ash greets me with a high five as I step out of the sunshine.

"Lucas," he says, "right on time as always. Have you got the tickets?"

Reaching into my back pocket, I pull out three tickets. The same text as the top line of the sign is printed on the front of each one:



"Where's Finn?" I ask.

"He's already inside," Ash replies, "raiding the popcorn stand. Finn says there's no way he's making the same mistake as last time."

I grin. The first rule of Black Hole Cinema Club is: *bring enough supplies*. Last time they showed every single *Star Wars* film back to back, but Finn ran out of snacks before the end of *The Empire Strikes Back*. We didn't make it out of the cinema until after dark and by then Finn owed the rest of us big time for

all the food that he'd "borrowed". So this time the snacks are on him.

Plucking his cinema ticket from my fingers, Ash turns to head towards the entrance. As usual he's wearing all black – his athletic frame clad in monochrome sweater, combat trousers and trainers – and as I follow in his steps, I catch a glimpse of our reflections in the grey smoked glass of the cinema doors. For a second, Ash is framed by one of the round porthole windows, the shape of his silhouette making him look like James Bond. Then he pushes the door open and his reflection slides away as we step inside the cinema.

The foyer is filled with light – a neon brightness that sends a shiver of anticipation down my spine. To my right, a vast video screen fills the upper half of the wall. Movie trailers play across this digital display: action-packed scenes flashing by in a flurry of spaceships, car chases and endless explosions. Beneath the screen stands a line of automated machines, but nobody's queuing to buy any last-minute tickets. In fact, it looks like the foyer is deserted, its glossy expanse of geometric floor tiles reflecting the LED lights overhead as their colours shift from green to red.

I shake my head. It's the same every time we come to the Black Hole. This place is supposed to be the future of cinema – every screen kitted out with the latest state-of-the-art technology – but it seems that nowadays most people prefer to watch films at home. I don't know why. I think there's something magical about seeing a movie on the big screen.

"Guys!"

At the sound of Finn's shout we turn to see him standing in front of the self-service kiosk. Just like the ticket machines, even the snack bar is fully automated here. In his arms, Finn's holding three red-and-white-striped paper bags, the neon sign above his head telling us exactly what's inside them.

REFRESHMENTS

Ash races me to reach him, each of us eager to claim our share of the snacks.

"Didn't I say I'd pay you back?" Finn grins as he hands me one of the bags, while Ash has already started to rifle through his. I peer inside to see popcorn, nachos, chocolate bars and crisps, a jumbo-sized carton of Coke jammed in there too

to wash it all down.

"Sweet, salty, chewy, crunchy, fizzy," I call out, checking them off one by one. "It looks like you've got all the major food groups covered."

"And this time I'm not starting on mine straight away," Finn says, patting his stomach through his *Tomb Raider* T-shirt. "I ate double breakfast to pace myself."

"This *is* my breakfast," Ash replies, pulling out a handful of popcorn and stuffing it into his mouth. As he munches, he gestures towards the digital display where the film times are shown. Today there's only one event listed.

SCREEN 1
BLACK HOLE CINEMA CLUB
(4Di) 11AM

"What's 4Di?" he asks through a mouthful of popcorn.

"I think I read about it online," Finn replies, his grin growing even wider. "Forget your 3D glasses, 4Di is cinema with another dimension added. Immersive. Interactive. *Improved*. Apparently when you watch a movie in 4Di, you feel like you're part

of the film."

I glance down at my watch and see the minute hand tick on towards the hour.

"Sounds like fun." Handing Finn his ticket, I turn towards the stairs that lead up to the screens. "But we need to get a move on. The first film is going to be starting soon."

The thing about Black Hole Cinema Club is that you never know what movies they're going to show. It could be the latest Marvel blockbuster or an all-time classic like *E.T.* – every film is handpicked to fit the chosen theme, but you only find out what it is when you're sitting in the cinema. Ash says it's clever marketing as by then it's too late to complain.

"So what do you think it's going to be today?" Finn asks, falling in step beside me.

"I'm not sure," I reply, glancing up again at the big-screen trailers as we cross the foyer. "We've done sci-fi and superheroes, so I reckon that rules out films about time travel, space exploration and the multiverse."

"Well, I'm in the mood for some horror," Ash chips in, staggering forward with outstretched zombie arms. "You can't beat a good monster movie."

Beneath our feet the floor tiles glow in shifting patterns of colour, almost as if they're guiding our path as we near the ticket check. There's no cinema usher waiting there, just a set of automated turnstiles barring the way. I know they're trying to save money, but sometimes I wonder whether there's anybody working here at all. Swiping our tickets, the gates open with a synchronised click and we step through before climbing the stairs.

Framed film posters line the walls: the open jaws of a great white shark, the silhouette of a tumbling astronaut, twin tyre tracks burning brightly as Marty McFly checks the time. Ash and Finn are still excitedly discussing what we could watch today, but as we pass each poster I count off the ones I've already seen: *Ghostbusters*, *Spirited Away*, *Avengers: Endgame.*

It's darker here away from the bright lights of the foyer and, as the staircase curves round, it gets darker still. In the ceiling, illuminated ribbons of soft purple light shift to a midnight blue. It feels like we're leaving the world behind and, as we turn another corner, the stairs come to an end and the space opens up into a wide corridor that stretches straight ahead. Reflecting lights glint from floor to

ceiling – indigo strips that make this place look like a spaceship on auxiliary power. But directly to my right a backlit number one set next to a gleaming set of jet-black double doors reminds me that we're still inside the cinema.

"Here we are," Finn says, stepping forward to push open the right-hand door. "Now let's get the best seats in the house."

Finn's got this theory about the perfect seat in the cinema. Too near the front and you risk getting neck ache. Too close to the back and the screen ends up looking the same size as your TV at home. He reckons the ideal spot is dead centre in the middle of the auditorium, so the screen fills your vision entirely. That's why Finn always sits in the same seat every time: J13.

Holding the heavy door open for Ash as he follows me through, we step inside Screen One. The house lights are still on, so it looks like the first film hasn't started yet. I breathe a sigh of relief. We're just in time.

From where I'm standing at the back of the auditorium, I can see rows of plush crimson seats sweeping down towards a huge cinema screen. Its snow-white surface stretches from floor to ceiling

and looks twice as wide, framed on both sides by lush red-velvet curtains. The walls of the auditorium are painted in dark swirls of colour, while the sloping ceiling seems to shine with stars. And it looks like we've got this place to ourselves.

Finn is already three steps ahead, checking out the letters fixed to the end of each row as he walks down the aisle. Then he freezes, Ash bumping to a halt behind him as Finn turns towards us with a hiss.

"She's in my seat!"

That's when I see her sitting dead centre in the middle of the auditorium, her cropped crimson hair almost the same colour as the cinema cushions. It's Caitlin. And next to her is Maya, her twinkling gaze framed by a pair of chunky transparent glasses as she turns in our direction.

"I didn't think you guys were going to make it."

Finn looks like he's ready to start an argument, but I feel secretly pleased. Since we started coming to these movie marathons, Maya and Caitlin have made it to every one. We never used to hang out before. It's the Black Hole that's brought us together.

"It's about to start," Caitlin says, tilting her head

in the direction of the screen. "Take a seat."

"You're sitting in J13," Finn protests. "I always sit in J13."

"Excuse me?" Caitlin frowns. Turning round in her chair, she makes a show of inspecting its backrest as if searching for a reserved sign. "I can't see your name here."

Finn turns towards me for support. "Tell her, Lucas."

I shrug my shoulders. "They got here first."

With a satisfied smile Caitlin swivels back round in her seat, while Finn flashes me a look of betrayal.

"It doesn't matter," Ash says, tugging at Finn's arm. He gestures round at the empty auditorium, the upturned seats stretching from A to T. "We've got the rest of the cinema to choose from."

So instead we pile in a few rows behind, making sure we've still got a good view of the screen. Stowing my carton of Coke in the cupholder, I stash my snacks on the side of the chair for easy access.

"I told you we should've got here earlier," Finn grumbles, fidgeting in his seat, as on the other side of me Ash takes a slurp from his drink.

But before I can say anything in reply, the lights in

the cinema start to dim and the sound of a familiar fanfare fills the auditorium. Sinking back into my seat, I turn my face to the screen as the heavy red curtains slowly glide together to hide it from view. Inside my chest, I feel my heartbeat quicken in anticipation. This is what they always do before the film begins.

As the curtains kiss, the music stops and the lights go out completely, leaving me alone in the dark.