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Opening extract from

Night on Terror Island

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NIGHT ON TERROR ISLAND

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CHAPTER ONE

THE PARAMOUNT PICTURE PALACE

Kip McCall let himself out of the house and walked into the village. It was a warm Friday evening in July and school was out for the summer. He stood for a moment, looking up at the Paramount Picture Palace, thinking how much he loved it and how lucky he was that his dad owned a cinema. Not that Dad ever looked at it that way. He was forever telling Kip how difficult it was to make ends meet and that he might not be able to keep the old place running much longer.

Mind you, he'd been saying that for as long as Kip could remember.

The Paramount was a scruffy, single-screen cinema, one of the last of its kind in an age when multiplexes ruled the earth. It had been built back in the 1920s by Dad's great-grandfather and had been in the McCall family ever since. These days it was looking pretty ropey. The front of the building was badly in need of a paint job and there were several tiles missing from the walls, but Kip couldn't have been prouder if it had been built from twenty-two carat gold.

Ever since he was old enough to walk and talk, he'd spent most of his spare time at the Paramount, helping his dad run things. Maybe that was why he was so mad about films. He didn't think he was exactly a geek, though plenty of people had accused him of being one, he just loved to watch movies, and when he wasn't watching them, he was reading about them, or talking about them, or looking forward to seeing the next one. So it was fortunate that Dad owned the cinema because it meant that during the holidays, and most weekends, he got to help out there and see all the films for free.

He'd always imagined that one day the Paramount would be his. But he realised now how unlikely that was. Dad was always talking gloomily about the coming of digital films and how, when that happened, it would all be over for the Paramount. A digital projector cost something like fifty thousand pounds, Dad said, money he simply didn't have, and besides, the tiny projection room over the front entrance wouldn't be big enough to house the equipment, so, at best, they had a few years left of struggling along, doing it the old-fashioned way.

Kip looked up at the shiny black letters clipped to the board above the entrance. PUBLIC ENEMY NUMBER ONE; a brand-new film for the start of a brand-new week. Kip had been looking forward to this one; the reviews had been excellent.

He went in through the entrance doors and found Dad sitting in the ticket office. He was going through a stack of paperwork, pausing every now and then to shake his head.

'How's it looking?' asked Kip. As usual, the paperwork seemed to consist of unpaid bills.

'Not good,' said Dad gloomily. 'We didn't break even last week.'

'They'll come flooding in for this new one,' Kip assured him. 'It's got Russell Raven in it. His films always do well.'

'Can't do any worse than *Love Reigns*,' said Dad, referring to the film they'd had last week. 'I can't understand it; it had Oscar nominations and everything.'

Kip frowned. He'd tried to talk Dad out of booking that one. It had been unbelievably soppy, a costume drama about young Queen Victoria and her romance with Prince Albert. On Tuesday night, they'd had exactly six people in to watch it. Kip felt fairly confident that *Public Enemy Number One* would do better as, judging by the trailer, it featured some of his favourite things – action, suspense, car chases and big explosions.

'Any news about a replacement for Norman?' asked Kip.

Norman was the Paramount's projectionist. He didn't go back to the 1920s or anything, but he had

certainly been there for fifty years. He hadn't been in the best of health lately and last week he'd announced that he had decided to retire to his sister's house in Alderly Edge and that he was giving notice of one week.

This was the worst news they could have had. Dad knew a little bit about projecting films, but not enough to cope if some problem arose, something that seemed to happen every other night. So Dad had put a frantic advert in the *Manchester Evening News*, hoping that there would be somebody out there who could help him. For five days there had been nothing and it was beginning to look as though they were in real trouble, but now Dad was handing Kip a letter.

'That was pushed under the door when I came in,' he said. 'What do you make of it?'

It was written in black ink in a weird, squirly kind of writing, the kind of thing you just didn't see any more. Kip read it with interest.

Dear Mr McCall

I read of your recent predicament in the Evening News. *No cinema can afford to be without a projectionist. Fortunately, I am a master of the profession, and have worked at cinemas all over the world, including Il Fantoccini in Venice. I would be*

interested in the advertised post and shall call upon you soon, to offer my services.

Yours sincerely
Mr Lazarus

Kip looked at his dad, then turned the letter over, wondering if there was anything else. 'There's no address or phone number,' he noted. 'Mr Lazarus. Cool name. And what's this Il Fanto-wotsit?'

'Il Fantoccini,' said Dad helpfully. He shrugged his shoulders. 'Search me. A cinema, I suppose.'

'We'll Google it when we get home,' suggested Kip.

Dad dropped the letter onto his desk. 'Who writes a letter and doesn't leave an address or a phone number?' he muttered.

'Or an email address,' added Kip.

'Exactly.' Dad glanced at his watch. 'Maybe you'd better get the popcorn on; it's seven-thirty.'

CHAPTER TWO

MR LAZARUS

Kip went into the confectionary booth. He switched on the popcorn machine and opened a huge bag of corn kernels.

'I suppose your girlfriend will be in tonight?' Dad shouted through.

Kip winced. Dad was talking about Beth, but as usual he'd got it all wrong. Beth was just his mate from school. She was as mad about movies as Kip was and she always came in on a Friday to watch the new release. Dad never charged her for a ticket because he seemed to think there was something funny going on, but it wasn't like that. Kip and Beth were just pals but it was pointless telling Dad that. He was always winking and pulling funny faces.

'There'll be three of you tonight,' Dad told him. 'Your mum phoned to say she's dropping Rose off.'

'Aww, Dad!' protested Kip. 'That's not fair.' Rose was Kip's little sister – noisy, irritating and worst of all, not even a *real* movie fan. Rose only liked soppy films about animals and ballet dancers and animated fairies. When she didn't like a movie, she would ask dumb questions all the way through in a very loud voice.

'Doesn't matter what's fair, your mum's got a meeting at the health centre tonight and she can't leave Rose alone in the house.' Mum was a district nurse and had to attend meetings at the most inconvenient times.

'Perfect,' muttered Kip. He upended the large bag of corn kernels into the mouth of the machine and hit the start button. There was a brief pause and then a series of popping sounds. Huge knobbles of popcorn began to spill from the dispenser, filling the booth with their delicious aroma.

The glass door of the cinema swung open and Norman plodded in. Despite the warm summer evening, he was wearing a heavy overcoat and had a woollen scarf wrapped around his neck. He trudged over to the counter and stood watching Kip for a moment. Then he spoke in his familiar mournful tones.

'Making popcorn?' he asked.

Kip looked at him. He felt like saying, *No, I'm juggling with porridge,* but he didn't. Norman could be touchy at the best of times and, since he was only going to be around for a couple more days, it wouldn't do to upset him. So he smiled and nodded.

'Yeah,' he said. 'I thought I'd get it started. Crowd'll be coming in soon.'

'Think you'll *get* a crowd for this?' asked Norman gloomily.

'Sure. It's had great reviews.'

Norman leaned over the counter to speak in confidence. 'Any luck with my replacement?' he murmured. 'I have to be gone by Sunday. Kitty's driving over in the Punto to collect my bits and pieces.'

'Er . . . Dad got a letter just now,' said Kip, 'from a guy who used to work at Il Fanto . . . Il Fant . . . this cinema in Venice.'

'Venice?' Norman raised his bushy grey eyebrows at this. 'What kind of a cinema would that be? The city's all underwater, isn't it?'

'Maybe they give you a snorkel and flippers at the door,' suggested Kip and he started to laugh, but Norman just looked at him blankly.

'How would you be able to hear anything?' he asked.

Kip shook his head. Norman must have had his sense of humour surgically removed at a young age. 'Shouldn't you be er . . . getting things ready in the projection room?' he asked hopefully.

'All sorted,' said Norman. 'Spliced the reels together this afternoon. Adverts, trailers, feature, the lot. All set to go at the flick of a switch.'

'Oh.' Kip returned his attention to the popcorn machine, which had now filled the heated glass box to the halfway mark. 'How er . . . how's your lumbago?' he asked, trying to make conversation.

'Oh, dreadful, but I don't like to grumble.' This was a lie; Norman *loved* to grumble. 'It's what you get when you spend your life standing around in cold projection rooms.' He leaned further over the counter, as if to confide a secret. 'Now, about my leaving present,' he said.

Kip stared at him. He hadn't been aware that there was going to *be* one.

'I don't want your father spending too much on me. I know he's got money troubles at the moment. So, just something modest. And perhaps a nicely worded card?'

'Right,' said Kip. 'I'll . . . mention it.'

'Good lad.'

The entrance door swung open again and Kip glanced up, expecting to see the first of the night's crowd arriving early, but the man who now stood in the foyer was not a regular and, frankly, Kip thought he was one of the oddest-looking people he had ever seen.

He was tall and whip-thin, dressed in a long, black leather coat that came almost to his ankles. He wore a black, wide-brimmed hat that cast a shadow onto his face, and from out of that shadow, peered two fierce eyes that were the palest shade of grey. There was hardly any flesh on the face at all. The cheeks were sunken, the skin unnaturally pale. Kip had the impression that he was looking at somebody very old

and yet the man's tall figure seemed incredibly wiry and full of vitality. He lifted a hand and Kip saw that he was wearing tight, black leather gloves that seemed to cling to his long fingers like a second skin.

'The Paramount!' he said, in a strangely accented voice. *Italian*? 'Oh yes, there's quite a history here, I can *smell* it.' His gaze seemed to focus on Kip, and his mouth shaped itself into a grin, revealing two rows of perfectly-shaped tombstone-white teeth. 'You, boy,' he said. 'Where is the owner of this fine establishment?'

'He's er... he's in the office.'

'Then would you be kind enough to tell him that Mr Lazarus is here to see him?' The man turned to Norman. 'And you, of course, are the projectionist. I smell celluloid on you.'

Norman looked slightly offended.

'I had a bath this morning,' he said.

'It weaves itself into the pores,' said Mr Lazarus. 'Don't worry, it is a fine smell – the smell of adventure and drama and romance.' He studied Norman for a moment. 'So, you're finally giving up on it, are you?'

'I beg your pardon,' said Norman.

'Moving on. Deserting this fine theatre of dreams where you have worked for...' He paused for a moment as though considering, 'For fifty years,' he said, with conviction.

'Good Lord,' said Norman. 'That's exactly right.

But how did you—?'

'It is my business to know,' said Mr Lazarus, as if this explained everything. 'And only a fool would come ill-prepared to an interview.' He returned his attention to Kip. 'Your father?' he enquired.

'Er . . . yeah, just a minute.' Kip moved to the adjoining door, thinking as he did so that he hadn't actually mentioned that the owner *was* his father. He pushed open the door and stuck his head through. 'Dad,' he said, 'there's a Mr Lazarus here to see you.' And he raised his eyebrows as if to say, *Wait till you meet this guy!*

Dad got up from the desk and came through, looking a bit flustered.

'Mr Lazarus,' he said. 'I wish you'd let me know you were calling tonight, I'd have—'

'Put out the red carpet?' said Mr Lazarus, with the ghost of a smile.

'Er . . .' Dad extended a hand across the counter to shake but Mr Lazarus didn't oblige. Instead, he lifted a gloved hand. One moment the hand was empty, the next there was a small square of cardboard gripped between thumb and forefinger. 'My card,' he said and handed it to Dad with a melodramatic flourish. Dad examined it blankly for a moment and then passed it to Kip. Kip looked at it. It was just a square of white card with the word LAZARUS printed on it in black letters – but, as he stared at it, something amazing

happened, something that almost made him drop the card.

For an instant, it seemed to become a small screen and, on the screen, Kip saw, in incredible detail, an ancient primeval forest and, moving through that forest, an olive-green Tyrannosaurus Rex charging after some unseen prey, smashing down the vegetation with its huge back legs, its mighty jaws open to crush and tear its prey. Then, just as suddenly, the image shimmered and vanished and it was simply a square of card again. Kip swallowed and put it down on the counter, stunned. Dad didn't seem to have noticed anything odd. He looked perfectly calm.

'So,' he said, 'you mentioned something in your letter about working in Venice. May I ask why you left your last position?'

Mr Lazarus's eyes seemed to moisten for a moment.

'Floods,' he said. 'The awful affliction that will one day overwhelm that entire city. Forgive me, but it makes me emotional to think of that wonderful old cinema, swamped by the rising waters and nothing we could do to save it. The owner, the incomparable Señor Ravelli, was obliged to walk away after so many years of hard work. Ah, how we cried when the news was given to us. How we wept! Do you know Il Fantoccini, Mr McCall?'

'I'm afraid not,' said Dad. 'We usually holiday in

Morecambe.' He paused, as though expecting a laugh, but he didn't get one. 'Do you . . . perhaps have a reference from Señor Ravelli?'

Mr Lazarus smiled thinly as though he'd just been insulted.

'Forgive me, Mr McCall, but a man such as myself needs no references. I have eaten, drunk and slept cinema, ever since I was the age of the boy who stands beside you. Your son, I have no doubt of that. I can see the resemblance.'

'Er . . . yes, this is Kip.' Then Dad indicated Norman. 'And this—'

'Is Norman Cresswell,' finished Mr Lazarus. 'A man famed throughout the world for his cinematic skills.'

'Really?' said Norman, looking doubtful. 'Oh, I don't know about that.'

'Mr Cresswell, you are a legend! Many people still speak of that night in nineteen seventy-nine, when the film snapped and you had it back up and running in less than two minutes, without missing a single frame.'

Norman looked bewildered. If such a thing had happened to him, it was clear that he didn't remember it.

'Well, I . . . pride myself on being a professional,' he said.

'Of course you do! Such a shame that poor health prevents you from continuing in this noble tradition.'

'It's my lumbago,' said Norman, making it sound almost like an apology. 'As the saying goes, Mr Lazarus, the spirit is willing . . .'

'But the flesh is weak. I know, I know.' He reached out a hand and patted Norman on the shoulder. 'My heart goes out to you, sir.' He paused, turned back to the counter. 'So, let me see . . .' He seemed to concentrate for a moment, as if marshalling his strength. 'This fine cinema was opened in nineteen twenty-three with a showing of *The Warrior Queen*, a silent movie for which a live orchestra provided an accompaniment.'

Kip happened to be looking at the card lying in front of him, and for a fraction of a second it showed another image: the Paramount Picture Palace in grainy black and white. A press of eager people stood round the entrance, the men all wearing hats, the ladies bonnets and fur coats. Kip was about to say something but, once again, the image shimmered and returned to blank white card.

Mr Lazarus continued speaking. 'The cinema has kept going ever since . . . your great-grandfather, your grandfather, your father and now you, Mr McCall, have worked tirelessly to achieve this . . . but, in nineteen ninety-six, a huge multiplex was opened only a short car journey from here, offering its customers the luxury of twelve screens and free parking. This had a huge impact on your fortunes.

Now, you struggle on in the knowledge that the coming digital revolution will probably finish you off completely.'

There was a long silence after that.

Eventually, Dad managed to find a few words. 'You've certainly done your homework,' he said.

Mr Lazarus smiled.

'Mr McCall, that's not homework. That's knowledge built up over a lifetime of devotion to the silver screen.'

'And may I ask what brought you to this area?' asked Dad.

'Isn't it obvious? There was a cinema that needed a projectionist. How could I stay away?'

'But . . . I only put the ad in the *Manchester Evening News* five days ago,' said Dad. 'If you came all the way from Venice, then—'

'I got here as quickly as I could,' said Mr Lazarus. 'The show must go on, Mr McCall. That is my motto.'

'Well, er . . . that's marvellous. I'm sure Norman here will be happy to take you up to the projection room to er . . . show you how everything works.'

'No need,' Mr Lazarus assured him. He lifted his hands as if framing a scene. 'The projection room is long and narrow. You have just the one projector, a nineteen fifties Westar system, a fine piece of machinery still running smoothly after all these years.'

'That's absolutely right,' gasped Norman.

'To the left there is a tower of spools where the spliced film runs to the projector. Because of the narrowness of the room, the film has to be twisted by forty-five degrees in order to run through the shutter. Unusual, but it works. You use an ordinary anamorphic lens to show the adverts and then switch to cinemascope for the trailers and main feature.'

Now Norman was staring at him, his mouth open. 'How could you possibly know all that?' he gasped.

'Experience,' said Mr Lazarus. 'So, Mr Cresswell, your last night here is . . . ?'

'Tomorrow,' said Norman. 'You see, on Sunday—'

'Kitty is driving over in the Punto,' finished Mr Lazarus. 'How is your sister, Mr Cresswell?'

'You know Kitty?'

'I know *of* her. And I'm sure she is going to make your retirement very comfortable.' Mr Lazarus considered for a moment. 'In that case, I shall be here tomorrow at seven-thirty prompt for the handover. If it is all right with you, I shall run the last show while you observe that everything is done to your satisfaction. I think after so long in this business, you deserve to take it easy on your final night.'

'Well . . . that would be a novelty,' admitted Norman.

'Excellent.' The entrance doors opened and the first of the evening's audience started to wander into the foyer. Mr Lazarus made a formal bow. 'Well, I see your audience is arriving, so I shall leave you to your work. Till tomorrow!'

And with that, he turned and strode towards the door. Dad, Kip and Norman watched him go. It seemed that the interview was over and the Paramount had a new projectionist – yet to Kip it felt rather like he and Dad had been the ones who'd just been interviewed. But customers were approaching the ticket office and there was no time to discuss the matter further. Dad scooted through to the ticket office while Norman made his way into the auditorium, looking slightly dazed.

And Kip . . . Kip just stood there looking at the white card lying on the counter, willing it to show one of those amazing images again. But nothing happened. Not that night, anyway.