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Opening extract from

Space Blasters

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Chapter One

Interview

It was Saturday, a day when Kip usually enjoyed what he thought of as a well-earned lie-in. But at nine o'clock sharp, Dad hammered on his bedroom door and told him to get up and dressed because somebody was coming to the house in half an hour's time, somebody he wanted Kip to meet. Kip groaned, but dragged himself blearily to the bathroom and showered himself awake.

When he finally made his way downstairs he found Dad, his dark hair combed neatly, sitting at the dining table with a skinny young woman, who was dressed in a rather hideous floral frock. She had unruly shoulder-length brown hair and wore thick, black-rimmed glasses. Having taken in her bizarre appearance, Kip noticed that she was holding a notebook and pen, and on the table in front of her was what looked like a small digital recorder. Dad's tall, gangly body was looking uncomfortable dressed in his best suit.

'Ah, Kip, perfect timing,' said Mr McCall. 'Come and meet Stephanie Holder. She's from the *Evening Post*. They're going to do a story about the *Space Blasters* launch.'

Kip tried to look positive, though he'd much rather have been tucking in to a big bowl of cornflakes right then. He pushed his dark mop of hair flat down on his head and straightened his T-shirt. He knew that his dad was excited about getting the latest *Space Blasters* film on its day of release, and he'd already told Kip that he planned to make a 'big splash' at the launch. He hadn't said anything about putting it in the newspapers though.

Kip scratched his head. 'Where're Mum and Rose?' he asked.

'They went into town, shopping for Rose's birthday present. Come and have a seat; we were just about to get started.'

Kip sat down and Stephanie grinned at him, displaying a fearsome set of multicoloured metal braces, clamped securely around both rows of her horse-like teeth.

'So you're Kip,' she said. Her voice was strange and nasal-sounding. 'Your father was just telling me all about you.'

'Was he?' Kip glanced at Dad suspiciously, wondering what he'd been saying. He took the empty seat beside him.

'Yes, he was telling me you're his right-hand man. He says that, even though you're only thirteen, sometimes you virtually run that cinema all by yourself.'

'Well, I wouldn't say that exactly.' Kip worked at the Paramount most evenings during his school holidays and had always helped out with the weekend matinees. He was proud of his involvement with the cinema, but claiming that he was running the place might be pushing it a bit.

'Makes a great story,' said Stephanie. And she wrote a few odd-looking squiggles on the pad in front of her. 'Shorthand,' she said, noticing the look of bafflement on Kip's face. 'A lost art. Hardly anyone bothers these days! So, you're still at school, I suppose?'

'Yeah, St Thomas's,' said Kip. 'Just up the road.'

'Must be handy that. Does running the cinema interfere much with your studies?'

'Well, no, not really. I only help out full time in the holidays,' explained Kip. 'During term, I just—'

'Kip's been helping me out since he was old

enough to walk and talk,' interrupted Dad, as though reciting a rehearsed script. 'Of course, the cinema's in his blood, you know. The Paramount has been in the McCall family since it was built by my great-grandfather in 1923.'

'Hmm,' said Stephanie, but she didn't bother writing any of that down. 'Are you an only child?' she asked Kip.

'No, I've got a sister called Rose. She's six. Seven in a couple of days.' Kip gave Stephanie a long-suffering look that seemed to say, 'Sisters, eh? What can you do with 'em?'

'Oh, so I don't suppose she'll be coming to the launch then? All that action and violence wouldn't really appeal to a seven-year-old girl.'

'She'll be there,' Dad assured her. 'The film has a 12A certificate. And she *loves* movies.'

Kip tried not to sneer. Yes, Rose liked movies all right, but only soppy ones with animated chipmunks, little ponies or dancing fairies.

Stephanie scribbled a bit more. 'I believe the Paramount is currently having a bit of a renaissance,' she said.

'Huh?' grunted Kip. His mind was still on those cornflakes.

'I think Stephanie is talking about the renovation,' explained Dad. 'Well, yes, that's true; I've invested a lot of money in the place. Mind you, we also had an anonymous donation. Back in November, somebody sent me a cheque to cover the cost of having the entire cinema steam-cleaned.'

'Really?' Stephanie looked intrigued. 'And you've honestly no idea who it was?'

'None whatsoever. There was just a note with it saying that it was to be used to pay for steam-cleaning – something I'd already been planning to do! I thought Christmas had come early!'

Kip shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He knew exactly where the money had come from . . .

'The audience figures are up too!' continued Dad. 'That's a wonderful thing in this day and age and it's why we now have the clout to get *Space Blasters* on its actual day of release. Usually, little suburban cinemas like ours have to wait weeks to get the big movies.'

'I see,' said Stephanie. 'Well done!'

'Yes, I'm very pleased about it. So I've decided to make a real effort with the launch. I've been in touch with one of those lookalike agencies. We're going to have a couple of space troopers there . . .

you know, full replica costumes, weapons, insignia, the works . . .'

'Cool,' said Kip.

'AND I'm arranging for an appearance by a special guest star!'

'Oh really, who's that then?' asked Stephanie.

'Can't say yet,' Dad told her, tapping the side of his nose. 'It's a *mystery* guest. All will be revealed on the big night.'

Kip looked at Dad and remembered him saying something about Sally Lovely, star of the TV soap *Corporation Road*. Sally was a local talent and Dad had recently read an interview with her, in which she said that she'd had her very first kiss in the Paramount Picture Palace. As far as Kip knew, all that Dad had done about contacting her was to send an email to the agency that represented her and he couldn't help thinking it must be more difficult than that to get her on board. Surely she'd want a fee?

Stephanie dutifully scribbled something onto her notepad. 'So,' she said, 'to what do you attribute this sudden change in the cinema's fortune?'

'Mr Lazarus,' said Kip, without thinking.

Stephanie looked at him. 'Who's Mr Lazarus?' she

asked, and Kip immediately regretted mentioning the name.

'Oh . . . he's just . . .'

'He's our projectionist,' said Dad. 'I *did* ask him to be here today, but he couldn't make it. Said he had something very important to do. I'm afraid he *can* be rather secretive.'

'Can he now?' Stephanie seemed to sit up and take notice. She wrote something on her pad and Kip had a sudden sense of misgiving.

'Yes, he's an amazing man,' said Dad, warming to his theme. 'He appeared from nowhere – just turned up out of the blue when our previous projectionist had given notice to quit. We were panicking to tell you the truth. But he took care of everything. Mr L has been in the cinema business for years, apparently, worked as an assistant to some of the great directors . . . and he has this wonderful invention called the—'

'Dad!' interrupted Kip. 'Maybe he doesn't want people to know about that.'

'Don't be daft, why wouldn't he?' Dad smiled at Stephanie. 'He calls it the Lazarus Enigma. It adds a whole new dimension to the cinema experience. Well, you'll see for yourself when you come to the

launch. Naturally, I'll leave a couple of complimentary tickets at the box office for you.'

'How very kind.' Stephanie flashed her metal encrusted grin. She thought for a moment. 'So . . . what does it do, this . . . invention?'

You don't want to know, thought Kip; but he said, 'Oh, it just makes the film look a bit more . . . a bit more . . .'

'He's not exactly selling it, is he?' observed Dad. 'It's amazing, Stephanie. It makes everything look super-real. It's almost as if . . . well, it's almost as if you're part of the film. I think that's why people are choosing to come to us instead of the big multiplexes in town.'

'So it's like 3D?' suggested Stephanie, sounding rather unimpressed.

'It's better than 3D,' Dad assured her. 'It's an utterly immersive movie experience—'

'You were saying this Mr . . . What's his name again?'

'Lazarus. I think he's Italian, by birth. Used to work at a cinema in Venice, Il Fantoccini. Kip, you'll be heading to the Paramount later on, won't you? Perhaps you could arrange for Stephanie to meet up with Mr L and have a chat with him?'

'Er . . . I'm not sure he'd be up for that,' said Kip, worried now that it was all going a bit too far. 'He told me he had a lot of work to do before the matinee. On the Enigma.'

'Oh, I see.' Dad turned back to Stephanie. 'He spends so much time in that projection room, you'd almost swear he lives up there!'

'He doesn't, though!' said Kip, a little too loudly. 'I mean, that would be mental, wouldn't it? Living in a projection room! As if!'

Stephanie gave him an odd look, but Dad just carried on, oblivious. 'I really think it would be worth you talking to him. The stories that man can tell about the film business, well, they'd fill a book.'

Stephanie smiled. 'Do you have contact details for him?' she asked. 'Perhaps I'll look him up before I start writing.'

'Well, you can generally get him on the phone at the cinema. You already have that number. He doesn't have a mobile. Can you believe that? No mobile in this day and age! And his address . . . let me think now . . .' Dad dutifully reeled off the false address that Mr Lazarus had given him back when he first started work, and Kip's sense of dread

deepened. What if Stephanie called by to see him? She'd realise the place didn't even exist.

'You know what, I don't think it's worth bothering,' said Kip. 'Honestly. He's really not that interesting.'

Dad stared at him. 'What are you on about?' he cried. 'You're always telling me some amazing story you've got from him.'

'Yeah, but . . . but . . . it's like you said, Dad, he's secretive and . . . and he won't want to answer a load of questions.'

'Oh, don't you worry,' said Stephanie. 'Secrets are my speciality. If he's got some, I'm just the one to worm them out of him.' She smiled knowingly. 'We journalists always get our story in the end.'

Kip tried not to groan. In trying to play things down, he'd probably made it worse.

'Anyway,' said Stephanie. 'When does this shindig kick off?'

'Friday night at eight p.m.,' said Dad.

'Perfect. Our next issue is out on Thursday. I think I can promise you a full page . . . maybe even a two-page spread if Mr Lazarus is as interesting as you say he is. Anything else I need to know?'

Kip wondered what she'd say if he spilled the beans.

'*Actually, yes, there is. Mr Lazarus is over one hundred and twenty years old. He has a business card that plays film images. He could send you – flowery dress, teeth braces and all – into a film about Roman gladiators so you could be chopped to pieces in an arena; he probably will do if you start asking too many questions. . .*'

But, of course, Kip couldn't say any of that. He just smiled, shook his head and sat in his chair as Stephanie said her goodbyes and packed away her little recorder. Dad showed her to the door and then came back, rubbing his hands, a big smile on his face.

'Well,' he said. 'I think that went rather well, don't you?'