

*KIP AND BETH ARE IN BIG TROUBLE . . .
IN A GALAXY, FAR AWAY.*

SPACE BLASTERS

PHILIP CAVEENEY

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Also by Philip Caveney

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SPACE BLASTERS

PHILIP CAVENEY

ANDERSEN PRESS • LONDON

For Sally Lindsay, who says she had her first kiss in the
Savoy Cinema, Heaton Moor.

And for Simon Pegg, *Star Wars* fan extraordinaire.

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 shin-dig 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?’

CHAPTER TWO

An Argument

AS SOON AS he'd wolfed down some breakfast, Kip made an excuse, let himself out of the house and hurried into the village to the Paramount Picture Palace. He wanted to warn Mr Lazarus of the potential trouble from this journalist. It was the last thing they needed, just when everything was going so well.

He paused for a moment to gaze at the cinema, marvelling at the changes that had occurred in just one short year. Previously a scruffy little fleapit with missing tiles and leaking gutters, the Paramount now gleamed from top to bottom. Funded by a dramatic rise in audience numbers, it had been fully refurbished inside and out. Tiles had been replaced, gutters repaired, seats and carpets steam-cleaned until they looked as good as new. The Paramount's changing fortunes had meant that things had improved at home too. The Christmas presents had been pretty spectacular this year, and Mum and Dad hadn't been too sniffy when Rose had pleaded with them to buy her a mobile phone for her birthday. Kip couldn't help feeling annoyed. He'd had to wait until he was twelve before he'd been allowed a pay-as-you-go phone.

It was all thanks to Mr Lazarus, of course. When the mysterious projectionist had come to work at the cinema, he'd brought with him his brilliant invention, the Lazarus Enigma, a device that did more than just enhance films as

Dad had told Stephanie. It could put you into them - really transport you into the film's story, so you could interact with the characters. You could even take out memorabilia from the film. That was how Kip had paid for the steam-clean of the cinema. He'd taken Jason Corder's ID card from the film *Spy Another Day* and Mr Lazarus had sold it to a collector. But you had to be careful because when you were in a film, everything was real - real people, real weapons, real peril - and if you didn't get out before the final credits rolled, you'd be trapped in there for ever, doomed to do the same crazy things over and over again, for the rest of your days.

Kip knew this better than anyone. So far he'd gone into three movies and in each case he'd been lucky to get out alive. You'd have thought that would be enough to put anybody off, and yet . . .

Dominating the display boards at the front of the cinema was a massive full-colour poster for the latest *Space Blasters* film - *The Emperor's Revenge*. The poster depicted the film's youthful hero, Zeke Stardancer, standing in an action pose, his powerful plasma gun raised, while one brawny arm encircled the waist of his regular love interest, Princess Shanna. Kip gazed up at the poster with mixed feelings. The *Space Blasters* series was one of his all-time favourites, and part of him would love to go into outer space and share a mission with his intergalactic heroes . . . but after the nightmare adventure he'd suffered in the monster movie, *Terror Island*, and the deadly games he'd been forced to endure in *Spy Another Day*, he'd told himself that nothing - absolutely nothing - would ever entice him to go into a movie again.

His girlfriend Beth felt the same way about it. It almost shocked him to think of her as 'his girlfriend' but he supposed that was what she was now. She'd been the one who'd persuaded him to go into the spy movie - mostly so she could meet her heartthrob, Daniel Crag - but the mission had not gone smoothly, and even she'd had to

admit that Crag's screen persona, the ice-cool super spy, Jason Corder, wasn't anything like as nice as she'd expected.

Still, it cost nothing to fantasise and for a moment Kip allowed himself to imagine sitting at the controls of the *Trillanium Hawk*, Stardancer's legendary spacecraft, guiding it through an asteroid field while he took out enemy spaceships with lethal blasts from his laser cannon.

Kip sighed and forced himself to push the thought away. From now on, no matter what enticements Mr Lazarus offered him, he was staying out of the movies for good and contenting himself with simply watching them.

He climbed the steps to the entrance and reached for his keys to unlock the swing door, but hesitated. The catch had not been secured, which was unusual. As Dad had jokingly touched on, Mr Lazarus did live up in the projection room where he kept his precious film props and memorabilia, and he was usually very careful to ensure that the entrance was always kept locked. Kip pushed open the door and stepped into the lobby. He turned the lock behind him and made his way across the foyer, but paused when he heard the sound of distant voices shouting. Was the Paramount being burgled or something? He concentrated for a moment and thought that he recognised one of the voices as that of Mr Lazarus.

He pushed through the swing doors at the far end of the room into the auditorium. He climbed the flight of steps beyond and turned to look up at the steeply angled seats at the rear of the cinema. The voices were louder now but still muffled and he realised they were coming from the projection room. He moved quickly and quietly up the steps until he was standing just a few metres away from the half-open door. Peering through, he could see Mr Lazarus's back, clad in his usual outfit of a white shirt, black leather waistcoat and pinstripe trousers. He appeared to be in the middle of a row with a stranger - a fat man with dyed curly

black hair and a straggly bootlace moustache. He was dressed in a grey leather jacket, jeans and what looked like a pair of cowboy boots. Despite the intruder's massive size, he shared some features with the far skinnier Mr Lazarus. He had the same cold grey eyes, though his were set deep in a red, chubby face, and there was something similar about the thin-lipped mouth. Like Mr Lazarus, the stranger looked maybe fifty or sixty years old, but something about him gave the impression that he was almost certainly much older. He also had an Italian accent, but his was gruffer and less lilting than the man he was arguing with.

'I can't believe it,' he snarled. 'I ask you to do this one thing for me, and you tell me it's out of the question. Why? What skin is it off your nose?'

'That's not the point,' replied Mr Lazarus. 'I have helped you many times and I will do so again, whenever you need it, you know that. I think the elixir should be enough, but it never is, is it, Dario? Always there is something else you want from me and always it is the one thing I cannot give you.' Mr Lazarus sounded angry.

'Hasn't anybody ever told you that blood is thicker than water?' countered the stranger. 'You owe me this favour.'

'I owe you nothing!' Mr Lazarus shook a gloved fist at the man. 'When you turned up in Scotland, I went against all my better judgement and gave you what you asked for. You promised me you would never ask again - but here we are, just twelve months down the line, and the song hasn't changed.' Mr Lazarus adopted a pitiful wheedling tone. 'Help me, Matteus, help me! I'm in big trouble!'

Kip frowned. *Matteus!* In the year that Kip had known Mr Lazarus, the old man had never revealed his first name. How odd to hear it after all this time.

The fat man scowled. 'I don't understand what the big deal is,' he said. 'It wouldn't cost you one penny and you'd be rid of me for good.'

'I seem to remember you said that the last time! But it's wrong to take more than you need. You notice I'm not exactly living in luxury here.' He waved a gloved hand at the crowded interior of the projection room - the ancient equipment, the stuffed animals, the ever-bubbling coffee machine. 'You think I've never been tempted? Of course I have. But I resist!'

Kip had to admit this was true. The only things Mr L ever asked Kip to bring out of the films were little trinkets. Oh, they were worth serious money to movie-mad collectors, but nothing compared to the riches he could bring back to the real world if he so desired.

'Then do this thing I ask of you and share the rewards with me. We'd be set up for life, Matteus. We'd be rich beyond our wildest dreams!'

'No, Dario, it's not how I operate, it never has been. You don't understand, do you? I only take what I need to survive and, for me, that's enough. Why can't you understand that?'

Kip decided he'd heard enough. He cleared his throat, rather louder than was strictly necessary, and the man called Dario lifted his gaze to stare at Kip through the open doorway, his aloof expression suggesting he didn't much care for what he saw. Mr Lazarus spun round and stared at Kip in evident dismay.

'Kip!' he gasped. 'What are you doing here?'

Kip took a hesitant step forward. 'I . . . just called round to see you. I heard voices. Do you know you left the front door unlocked?'

'Did I?' Mr Lazarus looked perturbed. 'I'm sorry, I was a little . . . flustered.' It was strange to see Mr Lazarus like this. He was usually so calm and assured.

Dario grinned. 'Who's this pipsqueak?' he asked, waving a hand in Kip's direction. 'Your new employer?' He laughed unpleasantly. 'He looks a little young to be giving the orders.'

'My employer's *son*,' Mr Lazarus corrected him. 'A good friend of mine.' He stared at Dario. 'I won't detain you any longer,' he said. 'I'm sure you must be very busy.' He glanced back at Kip. 'My brother was just leaving.'

'Your . . . brother?' Kip stared at Mr Lazarus in amazement. 'I didn't know you had a—'

'Oh, so he's not mentioned me, then?' said Dario. He shook his head and tutted loudly. 'Matteus, I'm offended. I would have thought you'd be proud to tell everyone about your little brother. After everything we've been through together, surely you owe me that much?'

There was a long silence while the two men stared at each other.

'I'll show you out,' said Mr Lazarus at last, taking a bunch of keys from his waistcoat pocket; it was plain that as far as he was concerned, this was the end of the conversation. Dario shrugged his shoulders but he obeyed the command, pushing his big body roughly past Kip's slight one and almost knocking him over in the process.

Mr Lazarus gave Kip an apologetic look as he went past. 'Wait for me,' he murmured. 'I'll explain.' He followed Dario down the steps to the exit and the two men disappeared out into the foyer.

Kip was left in the empty projection room, feeling rather awkward and wondering why Mr Lazarus had kept his brother a secret for a whole year.

He didn't have to wait long to find out.

CHAPTER THREE

Dario

FIVE MINUTES LATER, Mr Lazarus was back. He ushered Kip to a seat at the small table and busied himself at his beloved Gaggia coffee machine, making Kip a latte.

'I can't stay long,' Kip warned him. 'I've got stuff to do before the matinee this afternoon.'

Mr Lazarus either ignored or didn't hear what Kip had said. 'I'm sorry you had to witness that,' he said as he steam-heated milk in a tall glass.

'That's OK,' Kip assured him. 'It's just funny that you never mentioned him before . . . What's his name? Dario?'

Mr Lazarus kept his back turned, but from the tone of his voice Kip could tell that he was frowning. 'I didn't mention him because Dario is trouble. Always has been.'

'He said he was your *little* brother?'

'Yes. He is five years younger than me.'

Kip wasn't really sure what that meant. He knew that Mr Lazarus was really over one hundred and twenty years old, so . . . Mr Lazarus seemed to understand his confusion.

'Obviously I have helped him over the years. You remember I told you about the film I go into from time to time? The one that keeps me looking younger? Like me, Dario is a traveller. He visits places all over the world, usually because he's on the run from somebody he owes money to. From time to time, he looks me up and I send him into the film so he can wipe away the years. You should

have seen what he looked like when he arrived here an hour ago! He looked every one of his . . .' He thought for a moment as though counting in his head. '. . . one hundred and seventeen years.'

The projectionist turned away from the machine and brought two coffees over to the table. He looked worried, Kip thought. Worried and tired.

'Is that the special film?' asked Kip. He pointed to a strip of old celluloid which was still threaded through the projector.

Mr Lazarus nodded. 'It's very precious,' he said. 'Like myself, it's more than a hundred years old. I'm sure you know that old film stock is highly flammable. I have to be so careful with it.'

Kip sipped at his latte, which as ever, was absolutely delicious. 'So . . . if you do all that for your brother, why the argument?'

Mr Lazarus sighed. 'Because, as always, he wanted more. You have to understand, Dario and I have never got along. As a child, he was always getting into trouble, causing fights, quarrelling with the local gangs, setting fire to things . . . If there was any kind of trouble you could guarantee that he would be involved! As he got older, we seemed to drift further and further apart. I found my vocation in the world of the cinema and he . . .' Mr Lazarus shook his head. 'He found his in the world of crime.'

Kip nearly choked on his latte. 'He's a gangster?' he cried.

Mr Lazarus forced a thin smile. 'Perhaps that is too strong a word,' he said. 'Dario has always been drawn to the darker side of society. What he likes best of all is gambling.'

'What, you mean, like making bets and stuff?'

Mr Lazarus nodded. 'With Dario, it's mostly card games. He's what is known as a compulsive gambler. He just cannot help himself. Wherever he goes, he falls in with the wrong crowd, he plays cards for money and, of course, in the end he loses. Then he has to leave wherever it is he's living and

start all over again. Usually he begins by tracking me down. He goes into the film and wipes away all the wrinkles and illnesses he's acquired since I last saw him . . .'

'How does that work exactly?' Kip had always wondered, and today Mr L seemed to be in a sharing mood.

Mr Lazarus thought for a moment. 'Let me see now . . . I think it was in the early 1900s . . . I took a year off from my duties with George Melies and travelled to England to work as an assistant to a young director called James Williamson. We worked on several projects together and one of them was a film called *The Elixir of Youth*. Just a short silent movie, maybe three minutes long. There is only one copy of that film in existence and I have it. The film . . .'

He broke off as a thought seemed to occur to him. He stood up, walked to the projector and carefully rewound the film to the beginning. 'An image is worth a thousand words,' he said.

A flickering black and white image appeared on the screen: a bearded man standing beside a table, which was set up in front of a mirror. The man was dressed as a magician with a turban and a long beaded cloak. On the table stood a small bottle.

'The bottle is supposed to contain something called Amrita,' explained Mr Lazarus, 'the name that the Indians gave to the Elixir of Youth. Have you ever heard of it before?'

Kip shook his head, concentrating on the action in front of him. Now an actor stepped onto the stage, walking with the aid of a stick, a stooped wizened old fellow with grey hair and a long beard. He handed the magician a coin and the man made a flamboyant bow and pointed to the bottle. The actor picked up the bottle and drank from it. He stood for a moment as if feeling some kind of an effect. Then there was a puff of smoke and suddenly he had changed to a young, clean-shaven fellow, with a straight back. He threw aside his stick and went dancing merrily off screen. The magician bowed, the screen flickered and went blank.