13. THRILL RIDE OF THE CENTURY

This part of space seems to be a communications dead zone. I can't get any signal on my phone. Maybe we're on the wrong side of the satellites. I'm going through old messages in my inbox for company. I've still got the last one Dr Drax sent: 'Tk care of u-self & children. C u in 10 hrs.' That was about twenty-four hours ago. Not only have I not seen Dr Drax, I haven't seen her planet.

I've also still got the first one. It says: 'Welcum 2 Infinity Park. B @ Poss Blding car park @ 8. Courtesy car in drive. Use phone to open car. Drv safely.'

Courtesy car!

'What's a courtesy car?' said Florida.

'Well, it's a car that they lend you and you

can use it as much as you like.'

'You mean a car for you to drive? Oh no, no, no, no, no, no, no! Not after last time,' said Florida. Then she said, 'What kind of car is it? Is it another limo?'

'Let's go and see.'

It was a little greeny Toyota-y thing. It looked like a big toy really. I put my hand out to touch it.

'Liam . . .' said Florida. 'We can't.'

'No, we can't. You're right. Except . . .'

'Except what?'

'Except I am supposed to be a taxi driver.'

'Oh.'

'So I've got to pretend I can drive.'

'Liam, you can only pretend you can drive in a pretend car. In a real car, you have a real accident and get us really killed.'

'It doesn't look that dangerous. I mean, it looks a lot less dangerous than the Porsche did. The text said you open it with your phone.'

I pointed the phone at it and the headlights blinked and all the doors popped open. Then a robot-y voice from the dashboard said, 'Climb aboard, Liam Digby.' You have to admit this was interesting. You can't really blame us for getting inside the

car. It would've been rude not to.

As soon as we were in the seats, the car spoke again. 'Hi, Liam, hi, Florida,' it said. 'This drive should take fifteen minutes. Don't forget to fasten your seatbelts.' And, without us doing anything, the engine started up. A nice, gentle little engine. It sounded so reassuring. It sounded like it *trusted* us. We fastened our seatbelts.

Florida was looking around the inside of the car. 'There's something missing,' she said. 'It's got hardly any levers or buttons.'

'It's an automatic. My dad drove one once when he was covering for someone else. He said it was like driving a dodgem car.'

Florida said, 'Dodgems are easy to drive.'

It was hard to disagree with this. I've driven loads of dodgems. Not one of them stretched my abilities. And this car seemed so helpful.

While I was trying to come to a decision I touched one of the buttons on the dashboard. Florida yelped, 'Don't! It could be the ejector seat or something!'

The windscreen wipers started banging over and back across the windscreen. We both laughed. At least we knew what one of the levers was for. And the one with the picture of the headlight on was

probably the headlights, so the one with the numbers on must be the one to make it go. I pushed it down one notch very gently and the noise in the engine changed to an angry roar. And the satnav said, 'That's my accelerator. Don't forget my handbrake.'

It wasn't even me. It was Florida who found the handbrake and slipped it. The car rolled forward, purring. Suddenly there was a different noise – a big honking noise, and some squealing and lights flashing. Another car was driving up behind us when we pulled out. Other cars! I'd forgotten about other cars. This one swerved out past us and honked us again. Another one squealed and honked just behind us.

'This is brilliant!' whooped Florida inexplicably.

The hardest part about driving a car is keeping it in the right place on the road. You mustn't go too near the kerb (your tyres make a weird screaming noise) or too far over to the middle (drivers coming the other way look frightened and angry).

At first I tried to stay pretty much in the middle. When I looked in my rear-view mirror there was a line of cars behind me doing exactly the same, so it must've been right. There was nothing at all ahead of us.

'Kings of the road!' yelled Florida.

We did everything the satnav told us and soon, instead of driving past neat lawns and white bungalows, we were bumping along a narrow cinder track through a field full of tents and huts. Little kids kept running up to the car, banging on the window and smiling at us. There were donkeys and ponies tied up at the side of the road. A camel even walked in front of us. I said, 'This can't be right.'

But the satnav said, 'Yes, this is right. Stop worrying.' Now that's what I call an impressive level of interactivity.

Then we saw it. Beyond the tents and over to the left, the Possibility Building. It really was big. And red. Like a huge unopened present. I was trying to imagine what was inside, which is probably why the car drifted slightly off the side of the track, which is probably what led to the sirens and flashing lights going off all over the place and Florida shouting, 'Stop! Stop!' I did stop. I stopped surprisingly completely. When we looked up there were two policemen coming towards us with guns.

'Well, game over,' said Florida. 'They are going to ask to see your licence. They'll find out you're not a grown-up and they'll send us home.'

Her theory was much more optimistic than mine. My theory was that they were going to shoot us.

The police in fact bowed to us, got on their radios, talked in Chinese for a while, then bowed again and one of them said, 'Honoured guests?' in English.

'Yes,' said Florida, 'honoured guests. That's us.'

Then he did this mime which I think meant, Follow-us-in-your-car-even-though-you-blatantly-can't-drive. And they led us all the way to the Possibility Building car park. This was the best thing ever according to Florida, because it was a police escort and even Madonna doesn't get a police escort.

'That's because Madonna doesn't have a dad like yours,' I said.

Dr Drax was waiting for us with the other kids and dads. She asked if we were ready to see the biggest thrill ride in the world ever.

I said, 'Yes!' slightly too loud and too excited to be truly dadly.

'Then let's go,' said Dr Drax.

The Possibility Building is so big that sometimes there are proper rain clouds floating around inside it. A room with its own weather. I can tell you all

that now. But I didn't notice any of this at the time. I didn't notice it because I was too busy looking at Infinity Park's main attraction, the World's Biggest Thrill Ride, the ride I'd been waiting to see all this time: the Rocket. In front of me. And above me. Way, way, way above me. Because the Rocket goes all the way, past the interior clouds, to the roof.

And the reason this ride is called the Rocket is that it is a rocket.

A real rocket.

A blue rocket.

A massive rocket.

Of the going-to-space kind.

It was so massive that at first we couldn't tell it *was* a rocket. It looked like a wall of metal pipes and panels. We couldn't take it in. We all looked up and then looked down, as though we were a bunch of scanners trying to upload an image. Samson Two seemed to have the fastest processor. 'It's a rocket,' he said.

'Yes.' Dr Drax smiled. 'It's my rocket.'

How good is that sentence? '*It's my rocket*,' like 'It's my lunch box,' or something.

'Of course we have been making rockets here in China since Feng Jishen invented gunpowder in the

year 970. At first they were used to fire arrows. They had names like Swarm of Bees or Five Leaping Tigers. But my rocket has a different purpose. It's called the Infinite Possibility. And . . .' she said, turning to the kids, 'I'm giving it to you. I'd like you children to think of it as a present. From my generation to yours. I'm not going to ride in it. But you are.'

'When you say ride in it,' said Samson One, 'do you mean, ride in it . . . to space?'

'Yes. The biggest thrill ride of all time is a ride to space. I'm sorry to have been so secretive about this. It was only because . . . it's a secret. And we want to keep it that way. Any questions?'

Monsieur Martinet said, 'You want to send our children to space?'

'For just a few hours. The rocket will pop up to space, do a simple little job and then pop down again.' She made it sound like an elevator. 'As thrill rides go, it's the ultimate.'

Everyone agreed.

Dr Drax went on, 'Most thrill rides have a height requirement. This one will need a bit more – you'll have to pass some medicals and you'll need to train.'

'We're going to be astronauts,' said Samson Two.

'In fact, here in China the word is "taikonaut". Yes, you are all going to be taikonauts, with parental permission, of course.'

All the kids looked round at their dads for permission. I even looked round for mine. Then I remembered that mine wasn't there. I was the dad this time.

Dr Drax turned to the children again and said, 'I called the rocket a present, but it's more a kind of apology. You see, I believe my generation has all but destroyed this pretty blue planet. I hope I'm wrong, but if I'm not then the only hope for humankind might be for us to start again somewhere else. Just because we've destroyed the Earth, that doesn't mean it's the end of the world. There are millions and millions of stars in the universe. There are probably even millions of planets like this one. Every bit as good as this one. It's just a matter of finding one.

'If we're going to do that, we are going to have to make some long journeys, journeys that might take years. And if a journey is going to take years, you'd better have a young crew. So that they'll still be strong and useful when they arrive. And that is what Infinity Park is all about. I want it to be a place

that will inspire young people like you to want to work in space. In fact, if they come to the park, some of them will be able to go to space, just for a little while. This is the prototype. You will be the first. The first children in space.' Then she said, 'Any questions?'

Florida's hand shot up. 'Does that mean we're going to be famous?' she said.

'Maybe. But not yet. As I said, this mission is a secret – our little secret.'

'How famous?'

'Well . . . world famous, I suppose. Maybe. As long as everything goes to plan.'

Florida was bouncing on the balls of her feet with sheer happiness. She put her hand up again.

'Florida?'

'I love this colour,' said Florida, pointing at the rocket. 'What do you call it?'

'I call it blue,' said Dr Drax. 'I think most people do.'

'But there's blue and blue. This is a lovely shade.'

'Perhaps we could call it Rocket Blue. Next question?'

The next question was from Samson Two. 'Could we call it Ballistic Blue? Ballistics is the science of

rockets, and Ballistic Blue has a nice alliterative quality.'

'Very nice,' smiled Dr Drax. 'Next question?'

Hasan said, 'That's a lot of paint. Did the supplier offer you a good discount for placing such a large order?'

'Does anyone have any questions that are not about the paintwork?' said Dr Drax.

No one did. 'In that case, one of our engineers will now show the children around the rocket while we grown-ups get down to the paperwork. Rather a lot of forms to fill in for this trip, I'm afraid. Surprisingly difficult to get insured for a flight into space. Even though this one is extremely safe. Completely safe. Almost.'

You could see that Dr Drax was disappointed, that she thought the children had sort of missed the point, going on about the paint like that. But that's what kids do when big things come up. We focus on the little things. Like the kids sleeping in this rocket now. They're not dreaming about Planet Earth. They're dreaming about their own little bedrooms.

I had a different reaction to the rocket. I wasn't interested in the paint. I had one thought. One big, damp thought. Namely:

I AM NOT GOING TO SPACE.

The children are having the thrill ride of the century. And we – the grown-ups – are going to sit around and watch and maybe video them or something.

'Come along, children,' smiled Dr Drax as the kids all climbed on to the escalator platform at the side of the rocket.

I said, 'But we can see round the rocket too, can't we?'

'I'm afraid not,' Dr Drax smiled. 'I want the children to get used to being together without their daddies. After all, they won't have their daddies in space.'

That's right.

Because . . .

I am not going to space.

Florida Kirby IS going to space.

That is exactly the wrong way round. It's supposed to be MORE fun being a grown-up. That's why I swapped being a kid for being a dad. What's the POINT in forfeiting your childhood if all you get for it is filling in forms?