

CRAIG FORGRAVE





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**ENC**  
Emperor's New Clubs  
P R E S S



# 1 *chapter*

## THE PYRAMID INCIDENT

Henry and Susan Little sat on a creaky rattan sofa in the lobby of their hotel in Cairo, waiting to be picked up by their tour guide, a slender polite man named Ahmed Ashoud. They had just finished their complimentary breakfast of minced vegetables, sausage rolls and unleavened pita toast. The food was making them miserable; it all smelled too much like stale closets and damp basements. Their delicate, sheltered stomachs groaned with the sudden shock of something different. The spiced sausage burped and churned inside them like rabid dogs wrestling over a bone. They could

still smell their waiter, his body odour close by like some insouciant glue; following them everywhere.

Henry knew this trip was a mistake. Henry met Susan in Greece twenty years ago. They were both backpacking around Europe, fresh out of college and eager for worldly adventure. Susan was topless on Perissa beach on the island of Santorini. Henry had a bottle of ouzo and a tent. They had each other that night under a full moon and a warm sea breeze. After that, they were inseparable. They travelled together for the next month, falling in love and making those lover's promises that were never meant to be kept. One of those promises they were now living out. Twenty years, another trip. Just the two of them. No kids, no worries, no problems. The only problem was that they were twenty years older.

Susan no longer wanted to camp and carry her luggage on her back. The romance of travel now meant four star hotels and American Express. She was the one who insisted they take the package tour. No more of this wandering with a backpack and eating home-made sandwiches on a public bench. They could afford more now. They had earned it. They were comfortable.

Susan and Henry Little waited with their senses alert, twitching with each new sound. Their room was a dump. Even at this hour, it was stuffy and hot. Susan closed her eyes and imagined herself back in their own suburb in St. Paul with it's antiseptic, sealed rows of neat boxes full of people just like them; peo-

ple who showered every day, cooked with salt, pepper and the occasional dash of HP sauce. She opened her eyes again, braced for today's adventure. She sighed, surrendering to the exotic spices and perfumes of Cairo that fought hand to hand with their Tide-washed clothes and suburban nostrils.

"Oh Lord," she thought, "am I really this boring after all?" She looked at Henry and knew she was a disappointment to him. He still wanted adventure, still imagined he was that young man she met years ago; that man who could sleep in a train station and live on potato chips and beer. She wanted to just go with it, let herself drift free and not give a damn. To eat food from street vendors and walk around strange cities after dark. Take a few chances. Live a little. But there were the boys to think about now. Tommy and Jimmy, her sweet little darlings.

Henry and Susan Little sat on a squeaky rattan sofa with the patient determination of two people who knew they had pre-paid for this trip and had no other choice but to slog onward. Day three of their itinerary. The arrival of Ahmed Ashoud. They really had no choice. Henry wiped a bead of sweat from his neck.

"Nine o'clock and I'm already sweating." Henry wiped a bead of sweat from his neck. The extra thirty pounds he carried around didn't help; thirty pounds he accumulated behind a desk. Henry still had a boyish face, now rounder and chubby. His hair was still brown, if thinner than it once was.

"I know, Henry. Why don't you get out the

video camera and take some pictures?” Susan patted Henry on the knee, then stopped. She had to remember not to treat Henry like one of the boys but it was hard. They were all little boys to her.

Today’s itinerary demanded visits to the Great Pyramid and Sphinx, the Archaeological museum, a local souk, a camel ride in the desert and an excursion to the beach at Alexandria. All meals and transportation were included.

“I’m going to the gift shop.”

“What, again? How many crystal camels do you need?”

“I’m going to get some candy. Mints or something.”

Susan got up, tucked her survival purse under her arm and made her way to the shop. Her survival purse bulged with the essential items outlined in the travel brochure that came with their tickets: handkerchiefs, a roll of soft toilet paper for their sensitive, American bottoms, insect repellent, malaria pills, sunscreen, bottled water, antiseptic and Pepto-Bismol.

Henry watched her walk away, proud of her figure. Susan had always kept herself in shape. She still had that firm body that excited him on that beach long ago in Greece. Her hair was short now and her lips had shrunk, becoming tight and disapproving. Henry hoped she would relax on this trip, loosen up. He hoped for at least a glimpse of the old Susan, topless and covered in oil; willing to try anything once.

Henry opened his polished stainless steel

camera case jammed with extra batteries, tapes, a dog-eared instruction manual and his pride and joy, the very latest camcorder. The camcorder that promised broadcast-quality pictures. He punched the “on” button and panned around the lobby, talking as he shot.

“Well boys, here is the lobby of our hotel. We’re waiting for our tour guide to pick us up and I’m here all alone as your mother has run off to the gift shop again.”

The boys were at home in Minnesota at summer camp. They were ten and twelve years old, totally absorbed by basketball and loud music and totally not into old, dusty countries without cable TV. Tommy and Jimmy would probably never see this video but Henry kept going.

“Look, there’s your mother now!”

Susan waved to the camera as Ahmed pulled up in his bright yellow mini-van. Entering the lobby, Ahmed walked right into the video as Henry panned to the entrance, following his wife on her exuberant journey through the lobby.

“The Littles?” Ahmed smiled at them.

“That’s us!” exclaims Susan, by the door. “Come on, Henry! Let’s not keep the man waiting!”

The Little’s hotel was quite close to the Pyramids but it took them almost an hour to get there as Ahmed stopped at six more hotels to pick up clones of Henry and Susan to complete his tour group. To Susan, this was the best part of travelling; meeting people from different places. To Henry, he could

care less if he met the Fergusons from Bangor, the Archibalds from Boston or the Miltons from Colorado! He wanted to set out on his own, blaze his own trail. Have an adventure, f'chrissake.

They arrived at their destination, the Great Pyramid of Cheops, the most impressive of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Stumbling out of the van, the happy group followed Ahmed and his bright red flag. At the base of the pyramid, Ahmed started one of his insightful talks about the sight before them; a talk that he considered worth twenty bucks in American dollars.

"And now we are standing in front of the great pyramid of Cheops, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. How was it built? Why was it built? What secrets lie hidden within its great mass? These questions we shall try to answer as we walk into the very heart of the pyramid. Follow me now into the greatest wonder on the face of the earth!"

The little group dutifully followed the flag bearer up the steps and into a passageway a short distance from the base of the pyramid. They follow single file down the stone corridor, lit by dim electric lights. They hung onto a rope railing that snaked down into the mysterious bowels of the Great Pyramid.

"You'd think they would put in an escalator by now!" Susan dug her elbow into her husband. "Are you getting all this on that fancy camera?"

"Yes, dear," said Henry, stumbling as he tried to zoom in on a spider web. "Boy, this place is old!"

“Don’t they dust this place? Look Henry, my pants are filthy!”

Leading the party, Ahmed slowed his pace. Something was not right, he thought. What is that light? Ahmed was sure that no extra lighting was installed since yesterday and besides, it didn’t appear to be normal electric light. It had a brilliance that he had not seen before.

“Oh well,” thought Ahmed, “Maybe there is a tour ahead of us!” This annoyed him as it would make the chamber cramped and distract the tourists from his delightful speech about the mummification process; a speech worth at least thirty American dollars.

“Careful everyone,” called Ahmed, as they entered the burial chamber, “We are now entering the burial chamber of Cheops, the builder of the great...”

Ahmed’s voice trailed off in disbelief. What is this? This rock? Ahmed had been to this spot many times and never noticed this rock before. It glowed, like it was on fire.

By now, the tour group was in the chamber, waiting for Ahmed to continue his speech.

Henry panned around the chamber commenting in satisfaction, “Finally, some decent lighting!”

“Henry, the tour guide has stopped talking! Go give him some money!”

“Later Honey. Why don’t you go stand beside that rock over there and I’ll take your picture.”

“Okay,” answered Susan, marching past the stunned Ahmed towards the glowing rock.

“Is that it? Just some dumb rock? Where’s all the gold shit?” asked Mr. Archibald, impatiently.

Suddenly, as Susan reached out to touch the rock, it moved slightly, emitting a rumbling sound. From the wall, a deep moan filled the chamber.

“Oh, is this a sound and light show?”

“I have never seen anything like this before,” said Ahmed, nervously. “Perhaps we should go back and -”

“No way! We paid our money! We want the whole -”

Suddenly, the room shook as the moaning increased. Chunks of rock fell from the ceiling. With a grinding roar, the rock pushed out from the wall and fell to the floor. Dust filled the chamber. Henry kept on rolling.

“Now this is more like it!” he screamed to Susan. “I’m getting closer.”

Henry peered inside the hole, his camcorder screwed to his right eye socket. Slowly, a hand reached out from inside and touched Henry on the nose and then the lips. It was a human hand and yet not human, the fingers longer and more delicate than a man’s hand. Henry backed away from the hole and as he moved, the hand followed. An alien hand. Slowly floating out of the hole in the wall, keeping pace with the retreating Henry Little. As Henry backed up, the hand kept pace, drawing out a long, fragile body of an alien that floated horizontally in front of Henry.

“Henry, get away from it!” Susan tugged her husband away from the Alien.

“Let go, Susan! You’re making the camera shake! This video is going to make us rich!”

The alien smiled at them, his lips cracked and dry. His head was egg-shaped, with large, elliptical eyes and dark pupils. His nose was petite and perfect, a plastic surgeon’s dream. There were no ears visible, but a long, scruffy white beard covered his chin. His limbs were thin, with little muscle. His skin was opaque, a silvery white. He wore no clothing, nothing covering his groin. It was smooth, neutered, asexual.

The alien floated out of the wall until his long, fragile body was completely exposed, suspended horizontally in the chamber. The Alien rotated into an upright position and hung suspended in the air. He opened his arms, palms open.

“Look, he’s got five fingers just like us!” whispered Susan, peering over Henry’s shoulder.

In the far corner, Ahmed had curled up into a ball. He pulled his robe over his head, hoping that would hide him from this demon. Ahmed waited for this angel of death to release him from this world for he had sinned many times, slept with unbelievers and lived off the infidel hoards. He was doomed.

Henry and the Alien faced each, waiting. The Alien glowed with brilliant light as he hung in the air. The Alien opened his mouth and let out a dry wheeze.

“God, anyone have any water?” The Alien wheezed again.

Susan opened her purse and pulled out her bottled water. She opened it and handed it to

the Alien. He drank, emptied the whole bottle before handing it back to Susan.

“Evian? Tastes good. Wonderful. Thank you very much.”

The Alien smiled at Susan and then addressed the tour group.

“Greetings, people of the Earth! I congratulate you on your progress over the centuries. You have made me proud.”

“Who...or what are you?” asked Henry.

“I am Armageddon, from a distant universe known as Heaven. I travelled to earth many years ago to create life on this planet. I oversaw the birth of civilization and then I built this resting place, this pyramid to cover my bed while I slept and waited for my children to grow up. You, my children, I slept and waited for you. I am the father of all humans. I gave you the secrets of my people and now I have chosen this time to awake and reveal more. To share with my children the secrets of my people. I shall travel to all parts of the world and meet with you all, share my knowledge with you before I leave for home.”

“But what secrets? What do you want to share with us? Why now?” asked Susan.

“Hush, my child! You have many questions and I have many answers. All in due time. First I must replenish myself after my long rest. I want you, Henry Little, to tell your President to expect me tomorrow. I will visit him at nine o'clock sharp!”

“Wait! How did you know my name? Tell us more now! We are curious to know all about you!” Henry moved closer, not wanting this to end.

The Alien grinned, as if enjoying some cosmic joke. He put his arm around Henry's shoulder, "Listen Henry, I've haven't had a smoke or a cup of coffee in three thousand years. My foot's asleep and I need a bath. I've got to check my messages, make a few calls and shave this beard off. Now, I've just got to run unless..."

"Unless what?"

The Alien looked over at Susan, "Unless your wife would give me one of her famous back-rubs. You know where she heats up the baby oil and -"

Henry shoved the Alien away, "How do you know about that?"

Susan flushed, embarrassed.

"Just asking, Henry. Jesus, don't get all upset about it!"

The Alien levitated up and out of the chamber, his body disappearing through the solid rock of the pyramid. The tour group stood rooted to the spot, staring upwards, towards heaven.

Henry kept his camera on the ceiling, hoping the Alien would return but he soon gave up. He shut off his camera and the spell was broken. Like greyhounds at the track, the tour group raced up the corridor towards the clear, blue sky of Cairo.

Ahmed lowered his robe and peeked over his arm at the chamber. He was alive, unpunished. Perhaps the demon had not come for him. Perhaps he was still a beloved son. He listened to the furious footsteps running away. His tour had left him. His tips had left him. The footsteps of the American dollars

ran away from him. It was the will of Allah. So be it.

It took only two hours for Henry Little to sell his videotape to all the major news agencies around the globe. By the end of the day, the hotel lobby was jammed with cameras and press. Henry Little was in the eye of the media hurricane; the man who met the Alien. First Contact. The Alien knew his name. The Alien had put his arm around him. The Alien had asked Henry Little to set up a meeting with the President of the United States. Henry finally had his adventure, the trip of a lifetime. The press couldn't get enough of him. Who was he? What did he want? Why him? Henry was a simple insurance salesman from St. Paul, Minnesota. Of course, all he wanted was money and fame. Who wouldn't?

As for the Alien, he was pleased with his performance. Back on his fiery throne in Hell, Armageddon laughed as he watched his monitors, watched the world's media go nuts over his little appearance. This was delicious, divine. This was the beginning of his master stroke.

Satan laughed at the world hanging breathlessly for him to make another appearance. Satan was Armageddon, the Alien. He was born to play this final role, this last joke on mankind. He started it all as a snake, chatting up Eve and telling her she was pretty. Now he would end it all as Armageddon the Alien, chatting up the President and telling him he was pretty. This was the

genius of Satan. He could see into the hearts of mankind. He knew what they wanted to hear, to feel. Now he was about to offer mankind the Great Temptation. Heaven on earth. Satan would offer mankind the keys to the kingdom, the forbidden fruit. As the wise Godfather Alien, Satan would reveal the secrets of the universe to the poor unsuspecting, sweet and gullible mankind. The children would listen to him. His children.

Satan shook the gates of Hell with his laughter.

“There are some days when I just can’t wait to get out of bed!” He cried, rubbing his palms together with delight.

Satan picked up his remote control and started to surf. The news was all about the Alien. Everyone, everywhere, all the time. Talking about him. Only him.