

**Carl Derham**

**OLI**

**A VERY NEW MOON**

## CHAPTER 1

### JOURNEY TO GIZA

The heavily conditioned air of the Oval Office was sliced by the sound of a telephone and the President picked it up.

“Yes, this is the President,” he said, leaning across the Resolute desk of the Oval office, consciously avoiding knocking over his cup of coffee for the second time that morning. The desk was made from the timbers of *HMS Resolute*, an abandoned British ship discovered by an American vessel and returned to the Queen of England as a token of friendship and goodwill. When the ship was retired, Queen Victoria commissioned the construction of the desk and presented it to President Rutherford Hayes in 1880. Although most presidents enjoyed the grandiose appearance of the desk, it was rather too ostentatious for this particular commander-in-chief. He just hadn’t got around to replacing it with a desk that would be less responsive to coffee ineptitude.

“Mr President?” The anxious sounding voice on the phone replied.

“This is Doctor Conway at G.A.S.P.”

“We have confirmed the trajectory of the asteroid 2534 Conway. It will cross the Earth’s path on the morning of February 14<sup>th</sup>. We believe that the probability of impact is 95%.” He hadn’t really wanted the deliverer of Armageddon to be carrying his own name, but you cannot fight centuries of tradition within scientific circles.

There was a silence that seemed to last forever.

“Hello...Mr President?” inquired Doctor Conway.

“Are you absolutely certain Doctor Conway?” asked President Daniels, “and if so, what are the implications?”

“We are certain of a 95% probable impact and the consequences are the total destruction of the planet and all living things upon it, Mr. President.” He continued, unable to hide the air of doom in his voice, tinged with a somewhat inappropriate level of excitement.

“This rock is 255 kilometres in diameter and it will split the earth open like an over-ripe tomato in two weeks. If anything survives the resulting shock wave and tsunami, then it will perish in the first half of the subsequent two hundred years of nuclear winter.”

The Global Astronomical Survey Project had been set up ten years before this incumbent had even thought of running for Congress. Following a prolonged lobbying effort by Doctor Conway and his fellow stargazers, it was finally accepted that the threat, presented by rogue astronomical bodies was tangible. Doctor Charles Conway acquired his PhD in Astrophysics at Cambridge and had spent most of his adult life trying to convince the powers that be, to take this problem seriously. Based in the Nevada Desert, they received and analysed data from fourteen observatories across the globe. Their budget was, in his opinion, inconsequential when compared to the very real danger that these nomadic rocks presented to the planet. Out of the millions of asteroids silently hurtling through space, they had managed to plot the course of about two percent. Most of these objects meandered harmlessly around the asteroid belt between the planets of Mars and Jupiter, but they had discovered an increasingly worrying number of rocks that for whatever reason had strayed into the inner solar system and would cross the earth’s orbit at varying intervals. They had begun tracking the path of the asteroid 2534 Conway, two weeks before. It had strayed out of the asteroid belt about two years before, probably after colliding with another rogue body, but had only recently become visible to Earth’s observatories. It was one of the biggest asteroids on record and was not really the type of thing you wanted careering through your solar system at over sixty thousand kilometres per hour.

President Colin Daniels had only been in office for two months. He was the son of a billionaire oil tycoon and was sitting behind that historic desk for one reason and one reason alone – to give more power to the oil companies and to stop the feeble minded tree-huggers from preventing further pilfering of the earth’s limited but highly profitable resources. He was an extremely amiable man with a good heart and an eye for the ladies that hadn’t been seen since Adam uttered the words, “mmm,

nice apple.” But the impending destruction of the planet was fractionally outside of his comfort zone. He placed the phone back into its cradle and began to rock nervously in his chair.

\*

Oli’s plane, the 7.45 from London Gatwick to Cairo, was due to take off on schedule. He loved to fly. Way up above the clouds, he could drift off into Oli World and imagine all the strange beings that inhabited the world of cloud below. If he hadn’t decided to become a drummer, he was certain that he would have trained to become a pilot.

He’d arrived at Gatwick airport two and a half hours before the departure of his flight, not because he had to check in, he’d already done that online, he was just very excited about the trip. He was lucky enough to be sitting next to the emergency exit. So not only was he able to stretch out his legs in the manner that he would if he were sitting in his living room watching his beloved Star Trek, but if there was ever a problem that required a hasty exit from the plane, he would be first in the queue.

He’d spent a few minutes wandering through the shops in the departure lounge until he realised that they were all full of tat, and so he’d settled down at a window that overlooked the runway and watched the unfeasible number of planes vying for their chance to leap into the sky and head for sunnier climes. Once he was finally seated on the plane, next to the window, he watched the ground crew buzzing around the wing like worker bees around the queen. But instead of feeding her royal jelly, they were loading her with tonnes of highly explosive aviation fuel.

Whilst all the passengers around him bustled to place their luggage in the overhead lockers, Oli imagined how he would be the hero of the flight, guiding people to safety and going back into the burning fuselage to rescue a beautiful young woman. Deep into the fantasy, they slid down the chute side by side, hands locked in the ecstasy of escaping certain death. Wreckage and injured passengers were strewn around them across the ploughed field that had become the final resting place for the stricken Airbus. Oli accompanied the young woman, whose name was Charlotte, to one of the waiting ambulances and she refused to let go of his hand, forcing him into the back of the vehicle with her. As they kissed in the back of the ambulance, hundreds of photographers grappled to get one shot of this laudable young man.

Oli was rudely pulled from his daydream by the oversized backside of a rotund woman pushing into his seat as she avoided another passenger attempting to shepherd his three unruly children down the aisle.

*Please don't let them sit next to me, please don't let them sit next to me, please don't let them sit next to me,* Oli silently chanted, his eyes shut tight in silent supplication. He really didn't want to spend the four-hour flight fending off the overlapping layers of the rotund woman as they invaded his narrow space. Nor did he relish the notion of the unruly brats kicking the back of his seat in an attempt to relieve their boredom during the long flight.

He breathed a sigh of relief as the maelstrom of discomfort passed him by and continued its journey towards the rear of the plane. He desperately attempted to retrace his steps to the back of the ambulance, but to no avail. That particular dream world was lost forever. Anyway, Oli knew in his heart of hearts that if this plane went down, he would be out of that door faster than a ferret down a rabbit hole. He wasn't a coward, but he did possess a very strong sense of self-preservation. He sat glued to the window as the aircraft was pushed back and then taxied to the runway. The engines whined and the edge of the tarmac rolled by increasingly fast. The overhead luggage compartments rattled as the plane reached its take-off speed. He had always thought it rather strange that people simply accepted the wisdom of sitting in an aluminium tube surrounded by highly explosive fuel whilst hurtling down a dead-end runway at over 200 kilometres per hour. He'd come to the conclusion that if you thought about it too much then you would probably never fly. He felt a twitch of excitement in his stomach as the nose came up and they climbed into the grey January sky. In no time at all, the cars and houses were transformed into insignificant little toys. Thousands of miniature people, hurrying about their daily chores. *What were they all thinking, where were they going, and what did they have for dinner last night?* Oli decided that not a single care could be given, because he was off for two weeks in the sun, away from the gloomy British weather and his even gloomier flat, in gloomy Fulham, set in the gloomy surroundings of gloomy London. But more outstanding than that, he was going to visit the most incredible feat of human engineering ever to grace this planet.

He had acquired an interest in the pyramids during the previous year. He'd never really been encouraged to read as a child. Even at school, he would only read the passages that were relevant to the next day's lessons, aimed at preventing a punishment rather than demonstrating any real interest in learning. But his latest girlfriend, Suzzy, who had sadly decided to run off with someone possessed of slightly greater ambition than Oli, was very much into the New Age way of thinking. She had persuaded him that much could be gained from spending a few hours a day engrossed in someone else's thoughts. Previously he would have spent those few precious hours carving through the backstreets on one of his various wheeled death traps, or listening to music whilst providing an accompaniment on his trusty drum kit. His recent love for books had somehow led him to discover the many theories that surrounded the existence of these great monuments, from the Egyptologists' point of view that they were constructed by their forefathers as great burial chambers for kings of old, to the out-of-this-world views of alien intervention and great civilisations lost in the mists of time. Oli just thought that they were an unbelievable achievement, whoever was responsible, and now he was going to see them for real.

Whereas most people would just sit back and take it for granted that we live in an age where flight is not only possible, but also commonplace, Oli fully appreciated the wonders of such an accomplishment. After all, it was only a short time ago that humans believed that manned flight was an unobtainable goal. Now he was speeding his way to Egypt in the same time that it would have taken those people to travel across London.

The plane reached its cruising altitude and Oli peered out of the window at the magical world of clouds. Mountains and valleys of downy vapour stretched as far as the eye could see. Oli thought how great it would be if he could get the pilot to drop him off, so that he could go exploring in this strange, yet somehow inviting land. He could just see, in the distance, a large peak of cloud with a hole through the middle and the sun's rays were shining through it as though lighting the entrance to a mystical kingdom. Another peak of cloud had taken on the shape of a barrelling wave, the kind that Oli took great pleasure in carving up with his seven foot gun surfboard, on one of his frequent trips to Cornwall. Oli was always accompanied on his surfing trips by Ed, the guitarist in the band and his flat

mate. They'd been enjoying the West Country for two years and had made many friends down there. Their favourite spot was a little village called St. Agnes, an out-and-out surfer's town. If you were not in possession of a surfboard in St. Agnes, you were either under five or over sixty and this rule was by no means set in stone. During one visit, he met an old local man, who following forty years of working as a fisherman, had decided to take up surfing on his sixtieth birthday. Obviously he wasn't carving the waves or performing flying cutbacks, but he was doing it. This really impressed Oli and he'd spent many an hour listening to Ol' Pat's sea-faring tales over an après-surf drink in the local pub.

He drifted off into Oli World for a while, unaware of the two immaculately presented stewardesses, pushing their trolleys down the aisle, to serve the hungry passengers their lunch.

"Would you like lamb or beef, sir?" the first woman asked. There was no reply. "Sir, excuse me sir, would you like lamb or beef for your meal?"

"Oh I'm sorry," said Oli, "Miles away. Ah...pork please."

"Lamb or beef, sir?" she repeated, without any hint of impatience.

Everyone who knew him, and that was a very large and diverse selection of people, loved Oli. He was the sort of person that inspired affection. He never had a bad word to say about anyone and was always game for a laugh. You just had to be prepared for things to take a little longer than usual. He wasn't intellectually challenged. He was actually quite bright, but he would suddenly and without any warning, drift off into Oli World, a fictional realm that his close friends had invented during one of his excursions.

"Actually I'm a vegetarian," he said, as he looked at the stewardess with that totally natural puppy-dog look that had sent many a young girl's heart fluttering. The vegetarianism was a new exploration for Oli. Suzzy had persuaded him to step away from the sausage counter and he'd continued down the meat-free path after she had dumped him. Throughout their short relationship, he had been guilty of cooking up the odd bacon sandwich, when he was sure that she wouldn't turn up at his flat and walk straight into the resulting haze.

Now, the stewardess could have gone into detail, about how he should have pre-ordered his vegetarian meal online, but she somehow appreciated that this would be pointless.

“I’ll see if we’ve got any meals for you in the galley sir. Let me serve the other passengers first.”

“Oh I don’t want to be any trouble,” said Oli.

“It’s no trouble sir,” she said, with a delicate tilt of her head and possibly the cutest smile that Oli had ever witnessed. She would definitely be the one that he would rescue. As she moved down the aisle, Oli turned to the window, pressed his forehead against the cool glass and continued his exploration of the kingdom of cloud. One minute or ten may have passed. He wasn't sure.

“Here you are sir,” the stewardess and her endearing smile chirped in. “We had one vegetarian lasagne in the galley. I hope you enjoy it.”

“That’s brilliant. Ta much.”

Oli took the tray, sporting several plastic containers. He lifted his gaze towards the stewardess to receive one more melting smile before she slinked off down the aisle.

Whilst carving into the somewhat bland, but nonetheless edible concoction in front of him, Oli’s mind drifted into the other dimension that he knew and loved. He could effortlessly wander into another realm and still perform necessary motor functions such as eating and rather more worryingly, riding his Piaggio scooter, but as the well-dressed man in his early thirties, sitting in the seat next to Oli discovered as he asked him how the meal tasted, communication with other beings was totally out of the question. He looked Oli up and down, noticing the loosely laced trainers, faded jeans and baggy T-shirt displaying a picture of an ugly fish with huge teeth. The man lent forward to peer around Oli’s long curly hair which had fallen over his face as he tucked into his food.

Nothing.

He gave up after two further attempts to communicate with the young man and continued with his meal. Oli hadn’t deliberately ignored him, but he was in the club where he’d spent the previous Saturday night, dancing in front of the most adorable girl. She was wearing a pink Lycra bra top and a skirt so short that it would be better described as a belt. He’d pressed his mouth against her left ear and shouted, “What’s your name?”

He moved back and she assumed the same position that he had previously adopted and shouted, “Sam. What’s yours?”

A further few seconds passed as they swapped positions. “Oli..” And that was it. They just danced for the next two hours. Oli always maintained that talking in a club is just too much like hard work. Best to just let your feet and arms provide the conversation. Strictly speaking, occupying the tender age of sixteen, Oli was not allowed into the clubs in London, but due to a combination of the facts, that his band had performed at several venues and that he was immediately adored by everyone who worked there, many backs were turned and a great number of looks were directed the other way. Oli and Sam had swapped phone numbers and arranged to meet again when he got back from his holiday. Had Oli’s understanding of female body language been anything other than hopeless, he might have realised that she was not ready to end the evening quite so briskly, but he had to see a girl a few times and just let it happen naturally. Of course, in club-land this usually meant that Oli never got the girl. But he was happy just dancing with her, watching her slender form shake and twist in front of him, even though he was hurtling across the sky at thirty thousand feet, eating a vegetarian lasagne and mange tout.

He bit into a piece of hard lasagne that had been baked solid on the side of the dish. Suddenly he was back aboard the plane. He turned to his right and asked, “How’s your meal?”

A group of Polynesian women in grass skirts should have appeared, bestowing garlands of flowers and singing “Welcome to Oli World”, but they didn’t, so the man in the other seat gave Oli a rather puzzled look and said, “Fine thank you. Yours?”

“Excellent ta. Best Lasagne I’ve had for ages.” Oli always insisted, contrary to popular opinion, that there was something rather special about aeroplane food. Whether it was because it appeared to be free, or because it was served in such a basic manner that it reminded him of camping when he was a young boy, he wasn’t sure. He just liked it.

“Oli,” said Oli, his right arm contorted across the arm of the two seats. His open hand was greeted by the hand of his neighbour.

“Stephan. Stephan Johansson.”

Stephan was slightly taller than Oli, helped by the fact that he was sitting perfectly upright in his seat and not lounging. He was wearing light coloured, neatly pressed trousers and the collar of his white shirt protruded symmetrically from the top of his woollen jumper. The total disparity with Oli continued to the top of his head, where his closely-trimmed hair perfectly crowned the ensemble of orderliness. Oli never judged people by appearances and could just as easily befriend a city banker as he could a penniless hippy living in a bus, although truthfully, he would probably spend more time with the hippy than the banker.

“Very pleased to meet you,” said Oli. “Have you ever been to Cairo before?”

Stephan gave Oli an amused smile.

“Yes, I actually come here quite often. I work for the Natural History Museum, in the Egyptology department.”

Oli reeled back in his seat and his eyes opened wide in a look of shock and disbelief.

“Now that’s a top job if ever I heard one. What do you have to do to get a job like that?”

“Well,” said Stephan, purposefully placing his plastic knife and fork on either side of the tray in front of him; “three years of study at Oxford, a one year placement working for the institute in Cairo, four more years studying for my MA, several trips to Egypt during the course of my studies, plus having an uncle who is director of Egyptian studies at the museum probably helped.” He smiled.

“How about you? Have you visited the pyramids before?”

Oli seemed to pause for thought, which amused Stephan. He assumed that he must have been joking.

“No,” he eventually replied.

Stephan found Oli a refreshing break from the stuffy academics with whose company he usually frequented. He talked openly about his work and his personal views on the origin of the pyramids. Having studied Egyptology for many years and mixed with hardened Egyptologists who could only see the one point of view, he should have been more narrow-minded, but he was really quite excited about new discoveries that threw doubt on the traditional teachings. Discoveries such as, the erosion on the body of the Sphinx, which could only have been caused by running water. He explained to Oli

that the last time there was such significant rainfall in Egypt was at the end of the last Ice Age, which would date the Sphinx back to 10500 BC. Oli listened attentively as Stephan shared a small part of his knowledge. The question that was itching to make its appearance might have appeared as though he was taking advantage of the situation, but it would have been sheer folly to let this fantastic coincidence pass him by.

“I don’t suppose there’s any way you could arrange for me to see inside one of the pyramids, is there?”

There, it was out. It was like releasing the safety valve on a steam engine that was about to burst a cylinder. He gave an almost infantile look, as if his entire face was saying ‘*pleeeeeease*’.

“Yes, of course I can.”

Oli wanted to jump out of his seat and punch the air, but he managed to replace this desire with a simple, “superb!”

“At the moment it’s totally off limits to the general public, so you’ll have to be my cousin.”

Stephan was enjoying his new friendship. It was very rare for him to be able to relax with someone without worrying about appearances and other inane social graces. His small social circle was mainly connected with the museum, or part of his large and wealthy family.

“I’ve never done it before, but it’ll be fun to tell a few lies. Where are you staying?”

“I haven’t booked anywhere. I’m going to find somewhere when I arrive. Can you recommend anywhere?” He paused and gave a concerned look, “Er cheap. I’m not exactly flush.”

“Why don’t you come and stay with me?” said Stephan. “I’ve got an apartment on the outskirts of town, just ten minutes from Giza. I’ve got to work some of the time but you’re welcome to come and go as you please.”

Oli could not believe his luck, or the generosity of his totally brilliant new friend. In fact, his luck was even greater than he’d first imagined. Stephan usually travelled in first class, but this was an unplanned visit and the only last minute ticket available had been in battery class. He graciously accepted the kind offer and reached for the overhead button that would summon the stewardess. Upon her arrival he ordered a celebratory coke and Stephan ordered a gin and tonic. They both melted into

their seats as the stewardess hurled her trademark smile in their direction and as she walked to the back of the plane, they twisted their necks in unison to the point where the sinews would stretch no more. They moved their gaze back to each other and exchanged a knowing smile and a raise of the eyebrows that needed no words.

Oli, like most struggling musicians, had very little money, but when his mother had died the previous year, she had instructed her lawyer to place the proceeds from the sale of her house into a trust fund for him. He was given a monthly allowance, and he would receive the rest of the not-inconsiderable lump of cash on his twenty-first birthday. He bought a new drum kit and moved to the flat in Fulham with Ed. His mother was Oli's last remaining family member, as far as he was aware. She'd remarried following the death of his father and Oli's stepfather had made no attempt to conceal his contempt for the free living young man.

"The boy's a dreamer," he would say. "A good stint in the Army would soon sort him out."

A good stint in the Army! Oli would rather sit on a wooden spike whilst carrying an anvil than join the Army. He loved his freedom. The ability to do *as* he pleased, *when* it pleased him and thanks to the generosity of his mother's will, he was now able to do just that. His dream, like that of so many young people, was to be in a successful band and travel the world, but for now, they had to settle for the odd gig at small London clubs, usually playing to a crowd of ten or twenty friends and being rewarded precisely zilch for their endeavours. He knew many people with boring dead-end jobs. Jay, the bass player in the band was amongst them. He wasted fifty percent of his waking life absorbed in an activity that provided no pleasure whatsoever, looking forward to the weekend so that he could go out clubbing and forget all the tedious drudgery of the week. To Oli, that was tantamount to wishing your life away. Okay, so Oli had no career and no prospects, but at least he was enjoying every minute of every day. Plus, he was keeping his dream alive.

After a while, Oli introduced Stephan to the world of clouds. At first, Stephan thought that maybe he was a bit strange, but after a few minutes of staring past Oli, who had pressed himself into the back of his seat to allow Stephan full use of the window, he was totally immersed in cloud land. The three large Gin and tonics definitely helped.

When they left the plane, Oli explained that he would meet him in the arrivals lounge, knowing that he would be held up in customs as he always was. He didn't know why, but on the few occasions that he'd been abroad, he was always stopped and searched. Of course, he never had anything incriminating on him, but they always assumed that he would have. As he sauntered through the green channel with his beaten up rucksack, he was waiting for the wagging finger instructing him to approach the tables aligning the room. The search was a fairly light one this time. He recalled once, flying back from Amsterdam, the customs officers at Heathrow airport had given him the kind of inspection that previously, he'd only seen on the television show, *Vets in Practice*. He met Stephan in the Arrivals hall and they headed for the exit. As the doors to the airport swished open, he was greeted by that wonderful blast of warm air that denotes you are no longer in England. Cool inside and warm outside, in Oli's mind, was the correct order of things. They climbed into a waiting black and white Lada. Stephan uttered something that Oli assumed must be Arabic, to the driver and they raced off at a rate of knots that was unbecoming of the old banger.

Oli was used to riding his scooter on the streets of London so he knew a fair bit about bad driving, but he'd never experienced anything like this. At one nail-biting point of the journey, the taxi driver was overtaking a motorbike, which was overtaking a car, whilst on the other side of the road, hurtling towards them at a similarly ridiculous speed, another car was overtaking a bus. The taxi driver appeared to be blissfully unaware of the impending crunch. He made no effort to speed up or pull in behind the bike, he simply continued puffing away on his cigarette with one hand on the wheel and the other nonchalantly resting on the door. Somehow, and against all the laws of traffic flow, every vehicle managed to pass without incident.

As they drove through the middle of Cairo, Oli's head protruded from the open window, his hair cavorting in the wind like an over excited hound. *This was nothing like driving through London*, he thought. The driver had to make constant corrections to avoid various forms of wildlife that were trotting down the street. They drove past a bustling market, the deafening cacophony of shouting, music and drums, drowning out the noise that was emanating from the taxi's antediluvian engine. Stephan left Oli to take it all in as he himself had done on his first trip to this crazy city. When they

reached Stephan's flat, Oli congratulated the taxi driver on his ability to stay alive. The driver gave a gravelly laugh and sped off into the distance leaving a cloud of dust and cigarette smoke in his wake. As the cloud settled, Oli slung his rucksack over his shoulder and checked out the area. The apartment was set in a stunning oasis on the outskirts of Cairo. It was one of seven apartment blocks surrounding a green area with a large pond in the middle. Not at all what Oli had expected to find in this arid desert region. They entered the building through two sets of smoked glass doors. The outer doors opened automatically and as they closed behind them, the inner doors opened. Oli remarked that it was like an airlock. Stephan explained that the double doors helped to keep out the dust and heat.

The entrance hallway was floored with highly polished brown marble with outlandish pot plants adorning every wall. Not a single dead head or brown leaf were to be found on any of the plants and Oli gently squeezed one of the leaves to determine whether or not they were fake. They were not fake. Oli had never before seen such exuberant style. They walked to one end of the room to the shiny metal lift doors. The lift took them up to Stephan's seventh floor apartment and as Stephan dealt with the three locks, pushed open the door and stood aside, he gestured for Oli to enter. Oli's eyes made a path across the marble floor of the immense living room stretching to the patio doors which led to the balcony. As he elevated his gaze, taking in the room, the view from the balcony appeared, filling his head with trumpet fanfares. For there, in the middle of the patio doors, framed as though they were a giant oil painting hanging from a glass wall, were the three pyramids.

"Holy oly..." exclaimed Oli.

He dropped his bag in the corridor and slowly walked into the room, unable to take it all in. He had never seen anywhere so opulent in all his life. Not only was the apartment hospital clean and perfectly furnished, but it had the most incredible structure in the world as a wall hanging. Stephan picked up Oli's bag and placed it with his own next to a semi-circular black leather sofa. He watched as Oli was drawn by some invisible line towards the patio doors. He slipped in front of Oli and unhitched the latch, allowing him to slide open one side of the patio doors.

"Holy oly..." he repeated

*I thought that's what he said,* thought Stephan.

Oli stepped out and placed his hands on the balcony rail. He moved his head from side to side taking in the full glory of the vista.

“Do you like it then?” asked Stephan.

Oli turned round to face him and just uttered, “woaw!”

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

Stephan went back inside to unpack his bag. He remembered how long he had stood out there on the day, three years ago, when he’d come to view the apartment. It is a good idea to be a bit coy when regarding a property with a view to buy. It’s best not to let the seller know how much you actually like it. But when he saw this view for the first time, he would have paid whatever they wanted to make sure that it was his. His father was always very tight with money, to the point that he would make sure the house maid did the laundry after ten o’clock at night when the electricity was cheaper. Quite sad really, when you considered that he was one of the largest shareholders in the regional electricity company. Stephan had adopted the attitude; *if you’ve got it, use it.*

While Stephan pottered about hanging his clothes and putting the kettle on to make a pot of tea, Oli stood outside watching a hundred thousand workers heaving those twenty tonne blocks of sandstone across the desert floor.

“Tea Oli?” called Stephan, holding up an ornate long spouted pot.

“Woaw!”

Stephan made the tea and took it out to the balcony where, set to one side, there was a small glass table with two metal chairs.

“Isn’t it something?” said Stephan and Oli turned around, saw the tea and came to sit down.

“Totally awesome,” said Oli as he picked up the small glass cup that contained an amber-coloured liquid. He examined it and noted that it was lacking the floating, scummy film that always occurred when he tried to make black tea in England.

“I’ve got to go out in a minute to sort out a few things, but just make yourself at home. If you want to go out for a walk there’s a spare key hanging next to the door. Your room is the one on the left as you look out to the balcony. I’ve put your bag in there.”

“Thanks, Stephan. It’s so cool of you to help me out like this.”

“Not at all,” said Stephan. “It’s nice to have some company for a change. I’ll be back in a couple of hours and we can plan our little trip to the pyramid.”

As Stephan left the building, he realised that he’d just left a complete stranger in his apartment, but somehow, and he wasn’t sure how, he knew that Oli could be trusted. As the taxi drove him to the office, he searched his memory for the last person who he had trusted so completely on first meeting and came to the conclusion that there had never been anyone. It was strangely refreshing.

## CHAPTER 2

### DISAPPEARED

Night had enfolded the ancient landscape of Giza, and Stephan led the way through the compacted desert sand. He'd returned home after about two hours to find Oli, sitting in the same position, gazing out at the pyramids as the sun slipped behind the crimson outline of a distant mountain.

They approached the menacing shape of the pyramid of Khufu, some two million three hundred thousand blocks of stone, some weighing in at nine tons, piled one on top of another, the four sides of the pyramid aligned almost perfectly with the four points of the compass. Oli found that he was craning his neck more and more as they approached the entrance. The dark shape above was silhouetted in the minimal light that the half moon was providing. They climbed a hand-cut trail of steps to the entrance and in no time were standing in front of the dark hole that disappeared into the carved limestone.

"I hope you don't suffer from claustrophobia," said Stephan, with a knowing grin on his face. "This passage leads down to the unfinished chamber. It's a hundred metres long and it was obviously designed with children in mind."

Oli wasn't aware of any phobias. He would quite literally have a go at anything. They descended into the heart of the pyramid with the beams of their torches dancing on the stone walls around them. The passage was just over a metre high and a metre wide. The slope was steep enough to make the act of walking upright slightly awkward, but Oli found that walking in a doubled-up position was nearly impossible. There were planks of wood on the floor with pieces of batten nailed across them to give the walker something on which to purchase. On several occasions, Oli nearly lost his footing and had to brace himself on the rope railings that ran down either side of the passage. The second time he did this he knocked his torch against the stone and it went out.

"Are you okay?" Stephan shouted, shining his torch up the tunnel to see Oli braced against the walls, shaking his torch with a movement of his wrist and pointing it at his face. It flashed into life

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