

**THE  
QUETZAL  
SKULL**

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# *Chapter 1*

**L**eaving was like seeing the islands for the first time. I pressed my cheek against the window of the cabin as the plane banked. Far below, the islands looked so tiny and fragile in the vastness of the ocean. The boats in St Mary's harbour were no bigger than toys. My crisp new haircut and the unfamiliar tightness of a shirt and jacket added to the unreality of it all. I hoped Julie would be at the airport to meet me when I arrived, as she'd promised.

As the cliffs of the mainland rose up out of the sea beneath and we soared over unfamiliar down-lands, farms and harbours, a jumble of recent events unravelled before me. How was it possible that any of it could have happened? It had all been a terrible nightmare. I felt as if my whole life on the islands had been wiped out. The crazy fury of the islanders. The night spent trembling in an underground cave. The flames from the fire they'd lit on the tiny spit of land forcing me to plunge into the icy waters of the Atlantic. The madness of it all. And the tusk which had started it all, now lost forever beneath the waves.

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The narwhal tusk. It was months since I'd first found it and been haunted by its strange inscriptions and the unearthly vibrations it emitted.

The narwhal tusk that had caused everyone to fear both it and me. I wished it had never been found.

Now, at seventeen, I was leaving all that behind. How was I going to fit in to the new life ahead? The islands had been my whole world. The sea, seals and rocks my only companions.

When we came into land I gripped the sides of my seat, fearing the plane would disintegrate and everyone aboard would be pounded into tiny fragments, as it bounced and juddered into touchdown. Once inside the airport the noise, bustle and stale smell unnerved me. I found myself sniffing the air like a trapped animal. There were too many people hurrying, jostling each other. Everything was a blur. And was I the only one listening to the disembodied voice of the announcer? The seething crowd waiting at Arrivals was a sea of straining faces and I searched frantically among them for Julie.

But there was no sign of her.

Hearing drifts of conversation it seemed as though I'd landed in some foreign culture. It sounded English, but I couldn't recognise the words.

Outside the terminal streams of traffic raced towards me. Cars honked and brakes screeched as I stepped off the pavement. A life-time observing the way things changed without warning out at sea had given me an instinct that

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forewarned me. I threw myself back as a black saloon car smashed into traffic bollards, missing me by inches.

“Crazy idiot,” yelled a taxi driver above the outraged shouts from a queue of waiting passengers who had narrowly escaped being mowed down.

Someone was helping me up, handing me my case which had skidded into the road. I found myself looking up into the inquisitive eyes of a man with a wizened sun tanned face.

“Are you O.K? You are not hurt?” he said in a distinctly foreign accent.

I shook my head. “Just winded. I’ve experienced worse.”

But I was more than winded. All my fears came rushing back. I was shaking. When you’ve been involved in something like I had you’re always on the alert. Always thinking it could happen again. It never really leaves you.

“Seems you have enemies.” His dark eyes were penetrating.

“No,” I said, shocked that he’d read my thoughts.

“That car... came straight at you. It didn’t intend to miss. I’m thinking you have sharp reflexes. Let me introduce myself. Juan Paseo.”

As I took his extended hand it felt sinewy and strong yet there was also a gentleness, a kind of suppleness and a faint aroma of aniseed. I sniffed, it was fennel.

In that instant I was back on the island. Back home.

“My home was in South America,” I heard him say, again

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picking up my thoughts. “But,” he added, “I have been living here some years.” He smiled and nodded at me.

I took the cue. “Gray Edmond, I live on the island of St Hellicks, thirty miles off the coast of Cornwall. Thank you, Mr Juan for helping me.”

“Not mister. Just Juan, please. But say,” he narrowed his eyes, “haven’t I seen you before?”

I gave a puzzled frown

“Ah! that’s it... Aren’t you the boy in the newspaper? I read about you being rescued from the sea. Weren’t you being chased by the islanders because you had some special emblem of theirs? From a unicorn wasn’t it?”

“No... Not a unicorn.” I didn’t want to sound so abrupt but this was not a good time... “It was a narwhal’s tusk.”

“Well that’s the same thing. The narwhal is a magical creature, the unicorn of the sea.”

God, not now, I thought looking around for an excuse to escape.

“So, I was right, si? You do have enemies.”

“No! No! At least not now.” Where on earth had Julie got to? “It’s a long story but everything’s blown over now.” I saw doubt in the stranger’s eyes as he shook his head. His persistence was odd.

“No, really, that’s all sorted.” I started to move away.

But he placed a hand on my shoulder and said, “I’m afraid it is not sorted, as you say. I am thinking it is just beginning my friend. Come, you’re looking as if you need a coffee.”

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“Sorry, but I need to find a phone. The friend I was meeting hasn’t turned up.”

“You don’t have a mobile?”

I shook my head. “My dad doesn’t approve of modern technology.”

The man smiled. “I too live close to nature but I do not refuse the help of modern gadgets. While I have other ways of communicating, I do carry this,” he said, producing a mobile from his pocket.

What other ways did he mean? I glanced at him. His face was expressionless as he handed me his mobile.

I dialled and waited.

“I am sorry my friend, there is no reply, eh? You want to leave a message?”

“No, not just now. Thanks. I’ll try again later.” I was puzzled. Where was she? It was not like her to be so late. But I knew if Julie said she’d come, she’d come.

“I ought to ring home and let my dad know that I’ve arrived safely and then I think I would like that coffee after all.”



Juan shifted on his bar stool and though his eyes swivelled to the left he did not move his head. He picked up his cup as though nothing of consequence had occurred.

It had been a mere flicker of the eyes but it had stirred my curiosity. I turned round. Someone was coming through the revolving doors of the arrivals lounge. He walked in a

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rigid almost mechanical way. I found myself staring at him without knowing why and he seemed to stare back. Then a horde of teenagers crowded in front of him and he was lost to view.

Juan coughed and I saw a momentary flash of anger in his dark eyes. It faded as quickly as it had appeared.

“I wonder who that was,” I said.

“Who? The big American with the bow tie?”

“No, no. Someone else. There was something really odd about him.”

“Can you describe him?”

“Medium height, bald, steel rimmed glasses. He looked very tense, sort of rigid... in a very strange way.”

“You see well. But you are missing the telltale details. Like the scar on the right hand. The blind eyes. The black leather belt inscribed with gold lettering. The gold watch. The leather pouch attached to his wrist?”

“But you didn’t even look at him.”

“I didn’t?” Juan laughed a deep throaty laugh that had no humour in it.

“And how could he be blind if he was staring at us?” My heart began to race. What was going on?

He wagged his finger jokingly at me. “My friend, there is looking and looking. Seeing and really seeing.”

What would he think about how I was ‘seeing’ him? He was like a shark. There was a steeliness in his eyes, and then that ironical smile, and something that seemed unshakeable, like the ancient rocks of my island home.

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“Hey, stop there.” Juan was laughing outright. “Not so fast. I am thinking that now it is my turn to say how I see you.”

I jerked upright. He’d read my mind again. If this was a game, it was threatening to get out of hand. I wanted to get out of there fast but not until I’d rung Julie again.

“Amber eyes of fire.” Juan seemed to stress the words, as if enjoying the very sound of them. “Tawny hair. A panther, ready to pounce. Emotional. In need of guidance.”

Nettled, I put my coffee cup down clattering it in the saucer. What did he mean, ‘needing guidance’? That was it. “I have to go. I’ve a train to catch.” I hesitated. “But I ought to try my friend again.”

“Impossible. You can’t speak to her right now.”

“How do *you* know?” A feeling of intense irritation crept up my spine.

He gave me a smile of complete unconcern. “Here. Try if you want.”

I took the mobile, conscious of his eyes watching me.

I dialled.

There was no answer.



Julie Heatheringay stood shaking by the side of the road gazing down at her new red scooter lying upended in a ditch. She’d managed to pull herself up and stood there unable to focus. Distractedly she adjusted her helmet, pushing back strands of her long black hair as she wiped the mud

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from her face with her gloves. She found she was unable to stop her teeth chattering.

She glanced in dismay at her wrist watch, she'd been late any way and Gray's plane would have landed by now. It had been her mother's fault insisting she collected a delivery of books before setting out.

She replayed the previous scene in her head. A black saloon car had come out of nowhere and had forced her off the road. The scooter had skidded but she had been thrown clear, landing heavily on her side, as her scooter plunged down a slope overturning in a ditch now swollen by heavy rains. Damn! She realised her wallet and mobile were now well and truly under water. On second thoughts she decided they would be safe as they were locked in the secure compartment under her seat together with her maps. Not that that helped. Out here in a lonely leafy lane in rural Hampshire how was she to call anyone without her mobile?

Her side, below her ribs, hurt so much she thought she'd be bruised forever. She'd passed a house a few miles back, but that was too far. There was no point in waiting around. If she got moving perhaps someone would turn up or she'd come across a way to get help. Her leg started to throb and as she glanced down she saw blood oozing through the rent in her jeans.

After hobbling a short but painful distance, she saw a farm cottage ahead through the trees. She dragged herself up the dirt track which led to the cottage, every stone and uneven patch of earth jarring her leg. The windows were

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curtainless, vacant and eye-like. Moss and fungus hung from the eaves. She rapped on the door with the heavy metal knocker. The sound echoed hollowly. Julie rapped once more, unaware that in the unused barn at the back a black saloon car was waiting, engine purring softly.