

# Quantum Singularity

Book Two in the Quantum Series

By Douglas Phillips

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## 1 Treasure

Diamonds, rubies and sapphires flashed every color in the rainbow around the darkened room, the result of strategically-placed spotlights that turned every facet on the precious stones into a glittering show. A moving walkway efficiently conveyed a crush of tourists slowly past crowns, golden swords and jeweled scepters.

Erika leaned over the left handrail of the conveyor and pushed close as the treasures passed. “Oh, my God, this is so great!”

She bounced up and down like a teen at her first rock concert. The years of anticipation were over and the Crown Jewels were only an arm’s reach away—behind bullet-proof glass, but still, amazing in their proximity. She glanced over her shoulder at Matt, who hugged her tightly from behind.

“Don’t look at me,” he said. “You’ll miss something.”

Erika elbowed him in the chest and returned her attention to the Crown of St. Edward, used in coronations going back four hundred years.

"Wow," she said, smiling. "So beautiful, and so historic."

More display cases drifted past, and it was soon clear the curators had saved the best for last. The Royal Sceptre and the Sovereign's Orb perched on purple velvet behind the glass. Attached at the top of the scepter, the Star of Africa, the largest clear diamond in the world, shined with a brilliance that seemed to come from within.

Erika's rapt attention was interrupted as a uniformed officer's voice boomed over the crowd with a combination of authority and graciousness that only the English can produce. "Watch your step, ladies and gentlemen. The conveyor is ending. If you wish to observe further, please make your way to the entrance for a second pass."

Matt and Erika stepped off the end of the moving walkway. "Let's go around again," she said. Matt nodded enthusiastically, and they worked their way through the crowd. This time, a group of Japanese tourists were in front, taking surreptitious photographs that were clearly not allowed.

“No photographs, please,” another uniformed guard called out. A Japanese man turned around, dipped his head and smiled guiltily. The camera remained in his hand.

As they approached the last display case, the lights in the room flickered and the conveyor lurched to a stop. Erika lost her balance and grabbed Matt to keep from falling over. There were several cries of surprise and murmurs across the room.

The guard called out, “Terribly sorry for the interruption. Step forward, if you please.” Most of the crowd exited the conveyor’s walkway, but the Japanese tourists held their position, blocking Matt and Erika. As Matt encouraged them to move forward, Erika leaned over the right handrail to see what was going on.

At the far end of the room, four shadows moved in synchronization across the floor and leaped vertically up the side of the conveyor. The shadows were arranged in pairs, two in front and two following, but they seemed to have substance, more like a thin layer of black rubber—or a mouse pad. They moved as if connected, even though there was nothing in between.

The pads crossed the walkway and jumped up again onto the left handrail. They stopped, with the two rear pads perched on the handrail but the forward pads inside the final display case, having penetrated the thick glass barrier as if it didn't exist.

"What *is* that?" Erika asked. Now that the pads had stopped moving, they showed additional detail, including what looked like tire tread.

The guard near the end of the conveyor seemed just as perplexed. He reached out for one of the pads. His fingers fumbled, unable to grasp it. "Lieutenant Morrow!" the uniformed man yelled.

Another man with stripes on his shoulders rushed to the head of the conveyor. "Everyone please hold your position." He held a radio in his hand.

Inside the display case, a metal arm appeared, attached to nothing but empty air. On its tip, a two-pronged claw began to open. The arm reached out and its metal fingers closed around the scepter.

The guard withdrew his pistol and pointed at the display case, but the confused look on his face made it clear he had no idea what his next step might be. Behind him, the Lieutenant raised his radio. "Code Red in the Jewel Room. Seal all doors."

Alarm bells shrieked and thick metal bars dropped from the door frames, sealing the room's entrance and exit. Guards rushed to both doors with hands positioned on their holstered weapons.

Only a few tourists had made it out before the bars dropped into place. Most stood frozen, their expressions ranging from stunned to curious. Several pointed at the display case. Others pressed themselves against the far wall, clearly afraid that gunshots might come next. The woman in front of Erika spoke rapidly in Japanese and clutched her husband's arm.

"Hold your position, everyone," the Lieutenant yelled once more.

Inside the display case, the disembodied arm lifted the scepter from two metal rings that held it in place. The arm withdrew, pulling the scepter closer. Then, with a loud pop, both the scepter and the arm disappeared, leaving nothing behind but empty space.

A collective gasp of disbelief spread across the crowd. “Did you see that?” said one. The security guards closed in on the display case. The Japanese man took more photographs.

Erika turned to Matt. “Ok, I’m officially freaked out now.”

Matt shook his head. “I’m with you there.”

They stared as the four black pads backed away from the display case and dropped shadow-like to the conveyor walkway. The apparition slid toward the barred doorway at the far end of the room and, without pause, passed through solid steel to the other side. The bars made a slight ring, as if struck by a hammer, but were entirely useless in containing the invisible thief.

Goosebumps raised on Erika’s skin. She looked up at Matt’s pale face. “Jesus, what the hell was that about?”

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Cody took a long draw from the blunt he had rolled for his unexpected company. He expelled the smoke and passed the joint to the young woman with dark eyes and a pixie nose

who sat on the edge of his bed. Val was getting hotter by the minute, and less clothed. What she was doing in his dorm room was anybody's guess.

She leaned against a wall where his *Scotland Forever* poster hung. The simple political statement had proven to be a chick magnet, easily visible from the hallway when the door was open. For reasons that he didn't yet fully understand, the English girls seemed to like boys from Scotland. Maybe it was the accent.

He poured it on for her benefit. "Auch, I'm a wee bit buzzed." He sat down on the bed alongside her. "But I'm enjoyin' the company of a bonnie lass, if I do say so."

He shoved a chemistry book off the bed and cuddled up closer. She blew out a chest full of smoke and leaned her head toward him. "Done with your homework?" she asked.

He gazed into her anime-sized eyes. "Nev'r had any."

She set the joint down in an ashtray and expertly swung one leg over his hips, pivoting to face him. Her hair flowed around his head and her fragrance filled his senses.

“Yer bum’s oot the windae,” she mimicked. “Isn’t that what you Scots say when you’re full of shit?”

Cody could produce no snappy comeback. This sweet siren—this dorm A-lister—sat on his lap, her ruby lips just inches from his own. The evening was definitely looking up.

“Doesn’t matter,” he finally said, doing his best Sean-Connery cool. “I don’t fancy that professor.”

A rattling sound jerked his head toward the door. *Auch! It couldn’t be Larry? Not now.*

Val heard it too and quickly dismounted.

The door never opened, but something was there. Four black rectangles lay flat on the floor, each with zig-zagged treads like the bottom of a tire. They moved in unison toward the bed.

“Holy shit! What the hell...” Val pushed herself flat against the wall.

That she saw it too wasn't reassuring. Cody hoped it might be a weed-induced hallucination. He got on his knees and peered over the edge of the bed as the four pads stopped just below.

*A remote-controlled gadget? A trick?* He half expected Larry to walk through the door with an electronic controller in his hand, laughing his head off.

That explanation went *oot the windae* when a golden bar covered in jewels dropped from nowhere and plunked on the bed directly in front of Cody. He looked at the bar, then looked up. A metal claw hung in mid-air, attached to nothing. He watched, mouth agape, as the claw disappeared with a popping sound, leaving no hint that it had ever been there.

The pads reversed direction, scooted across the floor and passed beneath the closed door, making another rattle as they exited. The room became deathly quiet.

Val crawled across the bed, her eyes wide and her mouth shaped in a perfect *O*. She kneeled next to Cody and carefully lifted the jeweled bar.

It was mostly gold, with ornate silver decorations on both ends. Glittering jewels of red, blue and green were embedded in the silver and a cut diamond as big as an egg was secured by curving silver supports at one end.

“It looks real,” Cody said. “Though its arrival was a wee bit supernatural.”

Val turned the golden rod in her hands and examined the detail on both ends. “My God, do you know what this is?”

“Something expensive?”

“It’s more than expensive, it’s famous. Cody, this is the Royal Sceptre. King Charles just used it at his coronation.” She held the diamond end close to her eyes, twisting it to examine each side. “It’s got a jeweler’s mark, see?” She pointed to the letters, *KA*, etched on one facet. “I’m quite sure it stands for Koninklijke Asscher, the Dutch diamond company.”

“You’re high,” Cody pointed out.

“Of course, I’m high,” Val answered. “But a little weed doesn’t make me stupid. It’s the Royal Sceptre, Cody, the real thing. That mark proves it.”

"How could you know all that?"

Val's face tightened into a disdainful sneer. "I'm fucking English, that's how."

Girl-wise, the evening was looking bleak again. Still, he was now in possession of a fairly fabulous-looking jeweled scepter. Finders-keepers, right? The turn of events was bewildering, and his testosterone-cannabis-laced brain did its best to compare both paths for the evening—beautiful Val on his lap versus the king's jewelry on his bed.

Surely, he could have both?

He handed the scepter to Val. "Let's share, shall we? I won't tell, if you don't." A dubious proposition, to be sure, but perhaps he'd gain a few points for generosity.

"Don't you think the King might be just a bit angry?" she asked.

The weed overruled any logic that might have entered Cody's mind. For reasons he couldn't fathom, his luck was on a roll and he wasn't about to give up on beautiful Val or the scepter. "Aww, who cares about the King? I never liked the guy anyway."

Val swung a leg over and repositioned herself on his lap. She laughed in a carefree way and kissed him on the lips. "Yeah, me neither."

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The screech of tires and flashes of blue and red across the kitchen walls immediately had Emilio's attention. He set down his cup of coffee and peered out the small window to see what all the commotion was about. Several police vehicles blocked the street below, their lights flashing. The CNP insignia on the door identified their origin, *Cuerpo Nacional de Policía*.

It was rare to see Spanish national police in France, but European Union rules allowed pursuit across the border, and Emilio's hometown of Saint Jean de Luz was on the French side by a cat's whisker.

French, Spanish, it didn't matter, Emilio was proudly Basque. His people flew the Basque flag at every restaurant, store and public place. France started at Bordeaux.

He left his coffee to get cold and rushed down the stairs. The cobblestone street was filled with police and some of his neighbors. “What’s the problem?” he called out to a policewoman who stood in the middle of the street.

The officer held up a hand. “Stay back sir,” she said in Spanish, and then quickly switched to French. “They’re just bringing him out now.”

“Who?” Emilio asked, walking toward the woman. The building across the street had six apartments. If one of his friends was in trouble, he had a right to know.

“I said, stay back!” she yelled. It was clear he would get no information from a Spanish national—or the police—there wasn’t much difference.

Emilio noticed another resident of the building, Julia, standing on the far curb. The old woman held a hand over her mouth and watched the proceedings with interest.

Emilio hurried across the street. If anyone knew what was going on, the meddlesome gossip would certainly have a fix on it. “Julia, what are they doing in your building?”

“What they should have done long ago,” she spat. “This time, Xabier has gone too far.” A resident of the building, Xabier was also a leader in the Basque separatist party. He’d been in trouble before, and Julia had threatened to have him thrown out.

A few seconds later a bearded man still wearing pajamas was roughly pushed out the door by two policemen. His hands were cuffed behind his back.

“Xabier!” Emilio shouted.

His neighbor looked up and nodded defiantly. “Eusko Alkartasuna!” Xabier shouted back. The phrase for Basque solidarity was banned in both speech and print, but rules had never stopped Xabier.

The police pressed him into the backseat of a car, the door shut and the car sped away. Emilio turned to Julia. “There’s no crime in organizing a political party, why did they arrest him?”

Her mouth twisted in disgust. “He’s challenging them, and he’s mocking the church. He has become a common thief. You saw the news story? The artwork stolen from the Prado Museum?”

“Xabier? Not possible,” Emilio replied. “He would never do such a thing.”

“He has.” She pointed to two more policemen who carefully carried a framed painting down the steps of the apartment building. “I warned him. He has brought nothing but shame to us. Now, I just want him gone.”

The painting the men carried was easily recognizable—one of the most famous in Spain. Naked people danced with hybrid creatures, animals played musical instruments, a bird devoured a human body in one gulp and a man’s empty chest was dissected by the agents of Hell.

*The Garden of Earthly Delights.* One of the most bizarre renditions of Biblical stories ever painted and a classic from the Fifteenth Century.

It was inconceivable that a painting of its historical importance could have been taken from a major European museum. Emilio had seen the reports of the theft in news feeds, but you can never believe what you read on the Internet.

“Surely, this is a joke?” Emilio said. “No one just walks into the Prado and takes a famous painting off the wall.”

“He had help... from the Devil himself.” The fierce look in her eyes made it clear she believed every part of the accusation. “They say an unnatural beast roamed the museum that day, with four black hooves and a claw that snatched whatever it touched straight into the netherworld.”

Emilio took a deep breath. Julia was one of those people who consumed the most foolish of online nonsense. She’d shown him absurd websites combining conspiracies and miracles, targeted at the ignorant and the religiously obsessed. Supernatural descriptions might appeal to fanatics like Julia, but the story of an invisible demon was, no doubt, pure fantasy.

More worrisome was Xabier’s documented history of flouting authority. In a Spanish court, obstinateness alone could bring a guilty verdict. The sensationalistic story wouldn’t help.

“Good luck, my friend,” Emilio muttered under his breath. “You’re going to need it.”