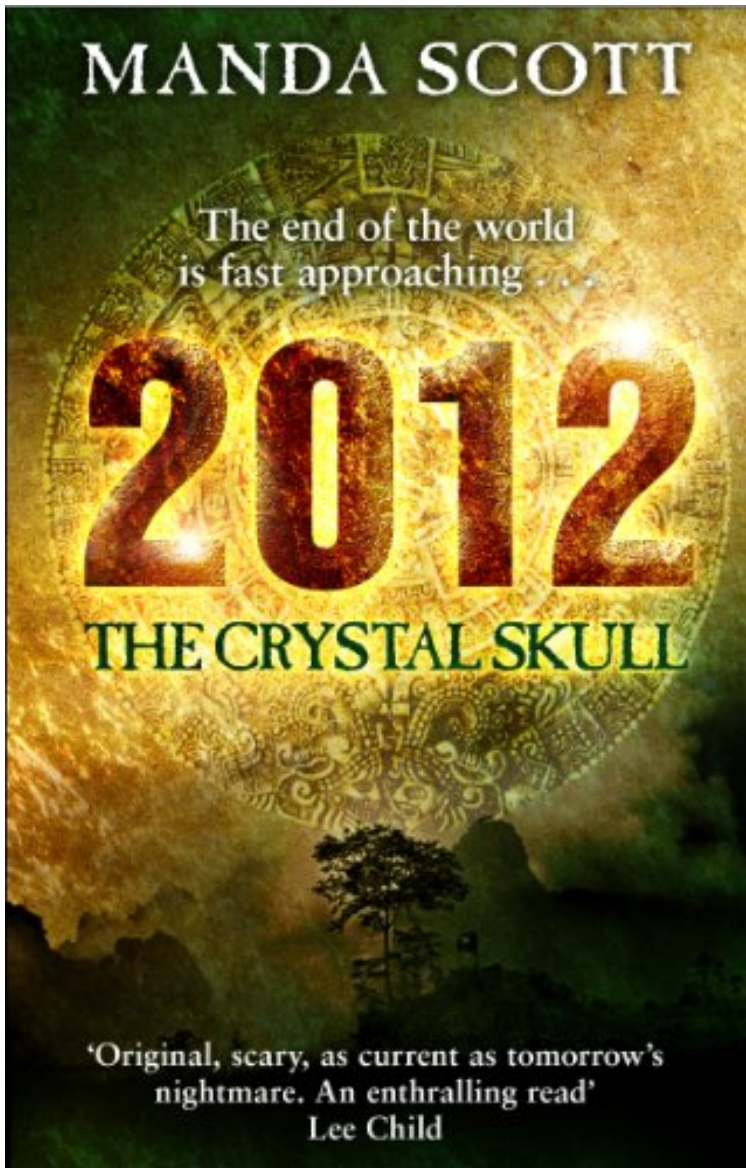


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2012: The Crystal Skull



Par Manda Scott
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Description : Description du produitThe end of the world starts now ...

Prsentation de l'diteurThe ancient Mayans predicted the End of Days with uncanny precision: 21 December 2012.But they also provided the key to staving off apocalypse: a flawless sapphire of incomparable beauty carved into the perfect likeness of a human skull.For more than four centuries, the skull and its legacy of dark intrigue and murder have been hidden, protected by a code few can break.Now it's about to be found.ExtraitCHAPTER ONEOur destiny exercises its influence over us even when, as yet, we have not learned its nature: it is our future that lays down the law of our today.Friedrich NietzscheBENEATH INGLEBOROUGH FELL, YORKSHIRE DALES, MAY 2007BECAUSE IT WAS HER wedding gift, Stella came out of the tunnel first. Filthy, wet and shivering hot-cold from the effort of the last fifty-metre

uphill haul, she crawled on her belly, pulling herself facedown into the empty blackness beyond. She moved slowly, keeping taut the umbilical line that linked her to Kit, feeling with her hands for the quality of the footing, then shuffling forward no farther than the spilled light from her head-torch. Like the tunnel, the cave was of chalk. Her gloved hands pressed on stone washed smooth by century upon patient century of water. Her torch revealed bright trickles of damp everywhere, washing over flat, undulating limestone. Beyond the splash of yellow light was unknown territory, unmapped, unexplored, as likely to be a ledge and a bottomless fall as a flat cave floor. With cold-stiff fingers, she established safety, set a bolt into the wall by the mouth of the tunnel, clipped into it and tugged the rope to let Kit know that she had stopped and not to pay out more rope. By the light of her head-lamp, she checked her compass and her watch, then marked the incline and her estimate of its length and direction with wax pencil on the chart she kept in her chest pocket, where it would not snag on tunnel walls. Only after she had done all these things did she turn and look up and round, and send the thread of her torch into the vast, cathedral space Kit had found for her. "My God . . . Kit, come and look." She spoke to herself; he was too far back to hear. She tugged twice on the rope, saying the same thing, and felt the single answering twitch and then sudden slack as he began to move towards her. Her hands coiled rope as a habit, without any conscious thought. Switching off her head-lamp, Stella stood in the roaring silence and let Kit's gift stand still in all its vast, black perfection around her, so that she could remember it for the rest of her life. Marriage is fine for the rest of the world, but I want to find you a present that will last us forever, Stell, something to remember when the magic of now has grown to quiet domesticity. What is it in the world that you want most, dearest, that will let you love me for eternity? He had said it in Cambridge, in his River Room, high above the Cam, with the river running glassy green below, on the morning before they had gone to the registrar with their two witnesses and made themselves legal in the eyes of the world. She had known him little more than a year; he the Bede's scholar to the depths of his bones, she the Yorkshire lass with a degree from a metropolitan university who knew nothing of the ivory towers. Between these two poles, they had somehow found a meeting of minds. That had carried them, in fourteen dizzying months, from discussions on string theory to marriage. Then, at peace with herself and the world, there was nothing she wanted from Kit that he had not given, but it was a beautiful day and she was thinking of rock and how little of it there was in the flat fenlands of Cambridge. "Find me a cave," she had answered him, without thinking particularly, "a cave no-one else has ever seen. For that, I will love you for ever." He had come to kneel by the bed, to a place where his complex green-brown eyes could see and be seen. His eyes were quiet then, more hazel than emerald, with hints of leafiness and summer. He had kissed her and smiled his driest, most knowing smile, and said, "What if I were to find you a cave with buried treasure that no-one has entered for four hundred and nineteen years? Would that be almost as good?" "Four hundred and nineteen . . . ?" She had sat up, fast, too fast for the heat of the day. Always, he surprised her; it was why she was going to marry him. "You've found Cedric Owen's cave? The cathedral of the earth? Why didn't you tell me?" "Because I wanted to be sure, Stella." "And are you now?" "As sure as I can be without going there to look. It's all in the cipher in the ledgers: the hanging thorns, the curve of the bow, the falling river. It had to be somewhere Owen knew like the back of his hand and the only place is Ingleborough Hill up in Yorkshire. He was born on the side of it. The thorns are gone by now but I found references to them in an old diary and there's a river that falls into Gaping Ghyll." "Gaping Ghyll? Kit, that's the deepest pothole in England. The cave system running out from it goes for miles." "It does indeed. And there are bits of it that haven't been explored yet, possibly a cathedral of the earth that no-one has been in since Cedric Owen wrote his poem four centuries ago." "Would you like to go, as our present to each other? To find the cave and search out the white water and dive for the hidden pearl entombed therein?" Stella had known instantly that the gift was for him as much as for her. Cedric Owen's blue heart-stone was Kit's life's love, his project, his grail forever quested for as long as she had known him; the great treasure of his college that had been sought by the high and mighty down the ages but never found. They had not known where to look, the great and the good. They had not read between the lines for the hidden words and phrases as Kit had. It was his greatest accomplishment, and his greatest secret; by marrying him, she became a part of it. Even so . . . she wrinkled her brow and looked out of the window at the sandstone library and great lawned courts of Bede's College, with their five hundred years of tending and all the legends that went with them. She had learned those, too. "I thought the skull killed all those who ever held it?" Kit had laughed and slid his part-dressed body over the top of hers and said, "Only if they fell into the sins of lust and avarice. We won't do that." They were close then, eye to eye, nose to nose, heartbeat to heartbeat, sharing each breath. She had held the weight of him balanced on the palms of her hands and looked up into the measure of his face and, quite truthfully, said, "I

could fall into lust for the first descent of an undiscovered cave. You can't begin to imagine what kind of a gift that would be." "But I can. You're a caver; it means to you what finding Owen's heart-stone would mean to me. It's why we can do it, you and me, bravely and together. Then we can tell the world what we have found." She was the caver; hers the responsibility to bring the dream to reality. Which was why she had persisted after she found the rockfall that blocked their route, and why, when she had discovered an opening that might lead to where they wanted to go, she had been the one to go first along the long, claustrophobic tunnel, where she had to become a snake, and then an eel, and then a worm in order to bend round the corners and slide under the overhangs and creep, inch by pulling inch, up fifty metres of a one-in-ten incline that brought her at last to the exit and the cavern beyond. The rope went tight in her hands and then slack again as Kit rounded the final bend. She switched on her head-torch, to give him something to aim for. Like a flickering film, her beam picked out random lengths of stalactites and stalagmites, closing like sharks' teeth from floor to roof and back again. She eased the camera from the lid of her pack. Then, turning a full half-circle, she took serial shots from floor to roof and roof to floor. The camera's flash reached out and splashed colour across the rising, falling calcite, drew rainbows from the constant sheen of water, sprinkled brilliant, living diamonds across the roof at each crack and angle of the rock. She took pictures for the sheer joy of it, revelling in the beauty. Only as Kit was easing out of the tunnel to stand beside her did she follow at last the thunderous noise and turn west, to shed light on the cascading torrent of the waterfall. "My God . . ." "The cathedral of the earth. You clever, clever girl. I thought that rockfall had finished us." She was no longer alone. Kit's voice warmed her ear. Kit's arm wrapped her waist, immersing her in bittersweet joy; it was always hard to relinquish the purity of solitude, and yet, out of all the world, this one man understood her need for black aloneness and did not fear it. She leaned in to him, dry-suit to dry-suit, and turned her light up to his face. Encircled by black neoprene, he was both filthy and euphoric; a man on the brink of a promise. She said, "I don't think Cedric Owen knew about this route; you'd never get a Tudor physician in doublet and tights along that tunnel." "Nor any sane man, without his ladylove to guide him." Kit twirled a knightly bow and blew her a kiss. "Mrs. O'Connor, I adore you and everything there is of you, but I can't kiss you with a head-torch on." Laughing, she snatched the flying blessing from the air. "That's Dr. Cody, until it becomes Professor Cody, and don't you ever forget it." They had been wed for little over forty-eight hours. Already the argument was old and private between them; in public there was never a chance he would steal her name. She said, "Have you a flare? It'd be good to see it all properly." "I have." He was already rummaging in his pack. "And then we have to find out where Owen came in when he walked the easy route. I'm rather hoping there's an obvious way out. I really don't want to have to do that second hairpin in reverse. Going down and then up and trying to turn at the sam... From Publishers Weekly Edgar nominee Scott (No Good Deed) mixes adventure, supernatural phenomena and cryptography to create a fast-paced supernatural thriller. Mayan apocalyptic astronomical documents chillingly predict that the world will end on December 21, 2012, unless 13 crystal skulls are reunited. Cedric Owen, a 16th-century scholar and physician whose family has safeguarded one of the skulls from time unknown, struggles to unlock the jewel's secrets and arrange for its safety. Nearly five centuries later, newlyweds Stella Cody and Kit O'Connor unlock Owen's cipher and track the skull to its hiding place, only to find themselves caught up in a global struggle between the keepers of the skulls and those who are determined to destroy them and bring about the end of the world. Stella and Kit's race to prevent the apocalypse turns into a life-threatening, heart-pounding battle between good and evil. (Apr.) Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.