

A Passionate Pursuit

(By Margaret Evans, © 2005)

Sean Gables knocked on her door, knowing she was alone in the house. He had waited for this opportunity.

The water in the shower had just heated up, and archaeologist Amy Parrish was reluctant to abandon it. She hoped the intruder was just a sales person she could ignore. Unfortunately, a glance through the peephole told her differently. She would have to answer this one and cast a longing, backward glance at the bathroom door. Maybe he wouldn't keep her too long.

She didn't invite him in, and it didn't start well.

"You know, not everybody at the San Francisco Museum of American Antiquities is against your working here."

The surprise Parrish felt at the remark registered on her face and in her response. She clutched the door and the doorframe, blocking his entrance.

"I didn't know *anybody* was against my being here."

Gables straightened his tie and ran his fingers through his blond hair. He considered that this lady had been working for the museum for three months now, and the board still didn't approve of her hire. Was it possible she really knew nothing about it?

"Hasn't your boss told you what an uproar he caused by hiring you as his assistant last fall? They only want *him* to work for them because they think they can control one person better than two. It took a lot of courage to stand up to them as he did. He told them to go fly a kite."

Parrish was floored. But that explained a lot and accounted for Joe Magee's reluctance to discuss the problems he was having with the museum board. She almost let go of the door but remembered in time.

"I don't have to ask if *you* object to my being here, do I? After all, you are a member of the board, too."

He grinned and looked her over. How could he object to working side by side with this statuesque Nordic beauty? He didn't really mind standing on her doorstep, time after time. One day, she'd let him into her house. He was certain he was wearing her down.

"Frankly, I think your professional expertise and prestige in the scientific community is something the board hasn't figured out yet that it needs. Most of them can't see beyond the ends of their budgets."

Amy's emotions were mixed. She had thought the museum had wanted her expertise in Maya culture.

"But Joe hired me, not the museum. Joe pays me. Why are they concerned about what he does on his own?"

"You're employed on museum pursuits, regardless of who signs your paycheck. They look to a time when our Joe of many talents asks them for another position funded by the museum. They think that's exactly what he'll do. It doesn't matter he's the chief anthropologist and runs the whole show for them. Nor that his reputation draws them important attention and money."

"Whose side are you on?" she asked.

"I have no stake on either side, only a personal interest in you. But I am curious about what keeps you here on what can't possibly be big bucks."

"This is a professional advantage for me, Mr. Gables. You talk of Joe's 'talents,' but you have no idea what that entails. What he teaches me could one day—"

"Help you find the Maya?" he interjected mockingly. Her field reputation was one of relentless hunting for evidence the ancient culture migrated to the western United States when their Central American dominance disappeared in the ninth century.

She stuck out her chin in annoyance. She was used to the challenge but not the sarcasm. And the fact that it was Gables made it harder to bear. He hadn't stopped harassing her since her first day on the job. Once she'd kept him at bay in the rain for twenty minutes. He was lucky today it was sunny.

"If you'll excuse me, I have work to do," she stated and started to close the door. From the corner of her eye, she could see steam escaping around the bathroom door. It beckoned her.

He stopped the door closing with his foot.

"But I'd like to discuss your work. I find the Maya intriguing, especially their predictions for the future."

Amy wondered if he would hang himself all on his own. Most people did when it came to spouting off facts about the Maya to her, and a not unpleasant vision passed through her mind of Gables sitting on a horse, his hands tied behind his back and a rope around his neck. The thought spurred her to prod him to that point faster. Who knew how long the hot water would last? She wished now she had turned off the taps. Forty gallons could vanish down the drain in no time.

"Most people don't believe the predictions; they just accept that the Maya made them. The Maya existed; the Maya disappeared. Those are known facts. But the predictions..."

“I’m actually well read on the Maya, Dr. Parrish. And that includes all of your publications. I know a lot about these strange, little people and their ritual killings.”

“Do you understand their gods?” she asked, now curious where he was headed. Perhaps it wasn’t to ridicule her, after all, but to get into her head.

“Probably not as well as you do, but enough to know those people were constantly making sacrifices to keep their gods happy. Bloody sacrifices. Ripping out hearts, cutting off heads, skinning people alive, throwing them into deep, fetid wells and cenotes. Lots of good stuff. I’m interested in why those grisly people fascinate you.”

Parrish hesitated to reply, reluctant to be drawn into a conversation with Gables that might reveal more of herself to him. He was a damn good male specimen and she might have been attracted in another time and place, but her inherent distrust of him born months before in a hotel bar remained. And his behavior toward her since only supported its continuation.

“Have you ever killed anyone, Mr. Gables?” she asked.

She caught the slight hesitation.

“Can’t say I’ve had the pleasure.”

“What we call our civilized society views the killing of individuals as wrong since we feel every human being has the right to life. We value life. The Maya also valued life but in a totally different context. Human blood was considered the supreme gift, and there were lines of people willing to give it to prevent bad things from happening. It was thought more sacred than the frail body through which it ran. To give one’s blood to the gods ensured them a place for eternity with those gods. They did it joyfully. It was never considered cruel, and the terms ‘loss of life’ and ‘wrongful death’ did not exist, for the concepts behind them did not exist. ‘Execution’ and ‘murder’ are labels we have given these acts, not the Maya. It was their way of life, their way to life with the gods. Grisly? Yes, by our terms and our culture and our values. Not by theirs.”

“And you find this belief in the supreme act of giving life appealing,” he stated rather than asked. Her reaction had been better than he hoped.

She was surprised he’d let her go on so long. She turned the conversation back to the general just as he tried once again to focus it on her. She was determined to keep him out of her head.

“All scientists are enticed by different cultures. Take Joe’s Olmec. Not much is known about them, and they never experienced the notoriety or advancements of the Maya. They weren’t even around for very long. But painstaking research has proven they are an important link...*the only link*... between the Indian peoples who came from the north and ended up in the south. So, regardless of the lack of information we have about them and the apparent unimportance of their language and their gods and their buildings, Joe is drawn to

them. They're *significant*. It's the *unknown* that draws us, Mr. Gables, the *unknown*. That's what draws me to the Maya. Not my judgmental feelings about their culture."

"But so much is known about them already," he argued.

"Not really. Just what they did while we knew where they were. We don't really know where they came from, how they achieved what they did in so brief a time, and where the vast majority vanished in an equally short period of time. Only a handful hung around to get butchered by the Spanish."

Gables looked thoughtful then shifted feet and changed his tack.

"You don't really believe all that stuff about the planets, their orbits, and the end of the world in 2012," he remarked. "We have a certainty about our lives, a destiny to fulfill. Nothing's going to end until our work is done."

He was thinking of his own planned destiny and not the evolution of man toward perfection.

"We are fragile beings," she said, looking him in the eye, "living on a planet carefully suited to us, a planet held by fragile bonds in an orbit that could be jostled by a minute particle hurtling at random through space. The slightest jarring of our satellite out of its orbit could cause total disruption of life as we know it here on the planet carefully suited to us. Now you tell me exactly where that certainty of yours lies."

Gables was unwilling to give up.

"The Maya had a better life, then, if what you tell me about them is true."

"The Maya believed their gods would save them. We're not sure if anybody or anything can save us. I often wonder if the Maya had a better life, whether gruesome or not by our standards. They had a feeling of surety and security that I don't believe we do."

"Would you rather have lived then?" he asked.

"No, I prefer the present."

The conversation faded, and Gables drove off toward town. Amy watched him go and wondered from where that spate of wisdom had come. Was it a staunch defense of the Maya or a reality that had come from Joe?

Feel them, he told her. Don't just learn about them. *Feel* them. That's how you'll find them.

Of course, he had meant she would understand their culture better because he no more believed her theories about the Maya heading north of the border than anybody else did. But it was Joe's words that gave her lots to think about as she returned to the bathroom, not Sean's or his revelations about the museum board.

The steam was dissipating and the hot water, mostly used up. In chagrin, she turned off the taps to wait for the tank to regenerate more hot water before taking her shower.

It struck her that one day she really would discover their fate.