

The Sixth World by Margaret Evans

CHAPTER 1

It was the kind of morning in Monterey, California, where the sea stretches out to meet the sky in a serene and endless grasp. Fishing boats had long since left for work and sailboats had not yet gone out to play, and the bay looked content. Its grays would soon give way to the postcard-blues of the Pacific once the sun cleared the foothill ridges to the east.

Claudio Igarreta stood on the balcony of his bedroom and faced the water, absorbing his daily dose of infinity. How many people on earth does God allow to live like this, he wondered. A cool breeze ruffled through his hair, and he pulled his silk robe tighter. Leaning his hands on the railing, he took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

He heard a soft purr behind him and was drawn toward the sound but stayed where he was, thinking about the relentless progression of time. And events. Prophecies. Into all this the innocents would fall, but he was certain they were the right innocents, and he offered a silent prayer they would be guided. For the safety of life on earth, he trusted he had done enough.

“Claudio,” she called again, more insistently.

“Yes, Lina,” he responded and this time went indoors.

Today there was no time to wait for the first sparkles of sun to dance off the ripples in the water. He looked at her.

Carolina was one of those women who had been pretty in her youth and grown beautiful as she aged. Her brown eyes held a fathomless depth for Claudio, and the still slender arms she reached to him now promised nothing but an extension of that peaceful eternity he so often sought.

He slipped off his robe, letting it fall to the floor, and pulled her into his arms. He did not even want to think about their upcoming separation.

“Soon, Lina,” he murmured softly in her ear.

Two Months Later

It was still dark in the woodland, although shapes had begun to define themselves. Sun came late here among the hills. A light shone from the window of the large, rustic house where a man and a woman finished their work. They counted on the darkness for their escape, however, and hoped the sun would slow its path today.

The man looked at his watch again.

“Stop it! You’re making me nervous,” the woman hissed, catching his movement. She adjusted herself in the chair, turning away from him to hear the voice on the other end of her cell phone. Her shimmering, dark hair was pulled back in a clip, and today she wore jeans and a sweatshirt instead of her usual silk.

“It’s late. Soon the sun will be up,” the man with her observed, noting also she had put on a few pounds. They were not unpleasant pounds, but neither her body nor her manner attracted him as they did others.

“It’s not my fault Moashe just now responded,” she retorted, snapping her cell phone shut and giving a toss to her head. A frown creased her forehead, spoiling the effect of her flawless olive complexion and fine, Middle Eastern features.

But it is your fault, he reflected silently, that you missed your plane and got in so late. He didn’t care what caused her delay as he watched her close out the computer programs and shut down the system. It was just too typical of her work lately.

“Well, we’re all set,” she continued, pouting, “now we’ll know everything this guy knows and he’ll never suspect a thing. Like always. Let’s go, Sergei. I’m thirsty.”

They put everything back as they had found it, down to the angle of the desk chair, and left. They pulled the back door shut behind them and trekked through the woods to his parked Blazer.

“We have to take the farm road,” he informed her, as he started up the motor. “There’s too much daylight. They’ll see us in the town.”

She inspected her beautifully manicured nails and pulled down the visor to scrutinize her face in the mirror.

“So now it’s my fault! You’re blaming me for everything!”

He drove on silently, thinking, yes, it’s your fault, your stupid, vain fault.

And also her fault he would have to return tonight to finish the job.

Earlier that morning, long before any hint of a sunrise teased the horizon, Xarantu stood at the head of the enclave. His phenomenal vision was aided only by a waning half moon as he looked impassively over the forty-five men who sat in three concentric arcs of fifteen each before him. The time had come, and, as Prince of the Maya, he was responsible for fulfilling the ancient prophecies in synchronization with the realignment of the heavens. He had been trained for this all his life.

He was twenty-three years old and tall for a Mayan, though not for an American. His long nose and round, dark eyes dominated his proud features. He had broad shoulders and a stocky build that came not from his job as a mechanical engineer but rather from his club membership. Tonight there was no paint or feathers, just khakis and shirt like the others, and his shoulder-length dark hair was pulled back simply by a band.

When he spoke, there was silence. They listened and memorized, from a lifetime of discipline. Once, they all turned to look at his sister, Marxan, who sat with several women to the side of the male group.

Xarantu bade the men stand, closing his eyes and extending his arms toward them, his palms down, fingers together with thumbs at right angles, pointing to each other. He began to chant softly, and the men joined him.

Claudio Igarreta sat apart from them, holding a flashlight and poring over the ancient texts. He looked up from time to time at Xarantu. Thank God the man spoke English tonight. Ancient Mayan was a killer language, far different from the documented conglomeration of the Spaniards' interpretation. He wished he could read the glyphs on the parchment in his hands. What a story they must tell! Too bad Xarantu wouldn't share it with him; he just smiled and told Claudio he would find out someday.

A sudden silence caught Claudio's attention. Xarantu was concluding the meeting and addressed both the men and the women.

"It is time for the supernova of our people. Once more before the destruction of the world, we will bring back the Maya. And we will rule in the Sixth World."

The valley lightened as the rising sun peeked over the foothills, and Fernando Garcia felt joy bubbling over within him. At last night's meeting of the lords, many things were set in motion, glorious things. His companion, Diego Ortiz, couldn't help but notice.

"What is it?" the younger man asked, not privy to the secret enclave.

"It has begun, Diego."

The two men sat on the hillside. Fernando, though short in stature and older, had the brilliance of dreams in his eyes; Diego, a lifetime of hard work with little hope of reward in his. Both were dressed in plaid work shirts and faded jeans. The younger man's pants were frayed at the hems.

Fernando had always been friendly to him over the years, but now Diego wondered if there was more to it than just that. And if it had anything to do with...

"It is coming," Fernando whispered, barely audible yet filled with excitement, "it will not be long, my friend."

"Is that what the gods tell you?" Diego asked. Every year of his life had seen a midnight, hillside gathering to commemorate the passing of time through the ages. But it was not his business to keep track of the time or the wishes of the gods.

"The end of the Fifth World is near. There will be a blaze of glory for us like nothing any generation has ever seen." He did not mention only a chosen few would survive the cataclysm.

"What must we do till then, my lord?"

There was a pause before the response.

"See that she gets the ticket, Diego," replied the older man.

"After she has the ticket, how do I make sure she actually gets there?" Diego asked, anticipating Murphy's Law.

"The topic alone will draw her past all obstacles. I am told we need her there. We need her *here*. I did not ask why. It was ordained by the powerful one who directs us."

Four days later and a scant twenty miles away, lives were changing in subtle ways, redirected by hidden forces.

"The Maya still rule...at least in *my* life," Amy Parrish mumbled to herself as she finished buffing the wax on her brother's 1962 Chevy Impala SS.

"James!" she called to an open upstairs window of their parents' home.

"Be right down," he replied.

Amy stood back and surveyed the car, unable not to admire its sleek design and gleaming chrome bumpers. It was one of the old classics. The red paint job now looked like a professional had refurbished it. She was grateful for the assistance from the latest Turtle Wax miracle but passed on the idea of a part-time job in detailing.

"Nice job, Sis," James Parrish remarked, regarding the old wreck he'd spent the last four years restoring. Everything looked original except for the CD player hidden in the glove box. Detailing was the final thing. Thankfully, he'd thought to include it in the deal with his sister.

"Where's the ticket, James?" she asked, her hands on her hips. She had offered to lecture his class in exchange for the ticket, but, unbelievably, his car had gotten involved somehow. She must have been half asleep at the time.

"Okay," he replied, recognizing her non-negotiable stance. He dug his hand into his pocket and fished out the small, rectangular piece of cardstock but hesitated before handing it to her.

"You know, you haven't lectured my anthropology class yet. How about I give it to you afterwards on Tuesday?" he proposed.

"No way, Jose. Bad enough I have to lecture to a bunch of kids, but I have to e-mail my name by 10 A.M. Monday morning to the University of the West because they handle the reservations for the seminar. I can't do that without scanning the ticket into the computer. I've tried for several years to hear this man talk, and Saturday he's going to talk about the Maya. It's my job to hear what he has to say. Hand it over."

It was not surprising that her brother's friend, an undergraduate nobody, got a ticket before she did. It happened all the time...a favor, a connection, or a gift, while Amy Parrish and the rest of the world waited patiently in line.

"Are you sure it's worth all this trouble you're going to?"

"He's one of the greatest pre-Columbian experts in the world."

"Okay. Don't forget Tuesday, 8:30 A.M. sharp, Granger Hall, Room 214. Oh, and I need your 4Runner next weekend."

"You're giving me this old thing with the bald tires and three miles to the gallon to drive into the sticks?" she asked, incredulous, and added, "May all the Chacs smile upon you."

"There's no other way we can transport our band equipment. Sorry. I hope this Magee appreciates what you're doing to get a seat in his seminar. Besides, it has more horsepower than your 4Runner. Should I ask who the Chacs are?" James inquired as he climbed into his glowing car and started the motor. He looked relieved when the restored 409 cubic inch V8 engine turned over without difficulty.

"A friendly group of Mayan rain gods."

He smirked and drove off, the powerful horses under the car's hood rumbling.

Amy stared at the ticket in her hand for a moment and looked up as her brother's car disappeared around a corner. She thought about the lecture she would present to her brother's undergraduate anthropology class. From their rich, flourishing, and brutally violent history right up to the recent deciphering of many of their pictographs and hieroglyphics, the Maya had always been a problem. Temples, pyramids, and high-terraced cities, all lavishly decorated with unique glyphs and painted murals, filled Central America. But, unlike other ancient cultures whose mysteries unraveled with more discoveries, the Maya grew more puzzling. Where had they come from and where had they suddenly gone in the ninth century? Coming up with material for this lecture would be easy.

What a fool, she thought of her brother's friend. Nobody should ever cancel on a Joseph Magee seminar on pre-Columbian America. *Nobody*. A thrill ran down her spine as she glanced at the seminar ticket.

The great Joseph Magee.

Diego Ortiz sat quietly in the back of the classroom. He'd been watching the lecturer and listening to her every word for the past forty-five minutes. A few students had glanced in his direction upon his initial arrival, noting the new face, but their attention returned to the front of the classroom. He was unconcerned. The class was huge. By tomorrow they would have forgotten they had ever seen him.

"The ancient Maya were deal-makers," the lecturer was saying. "They made bargains for their grains, fruit, health, and happiness with all the appropriate gods of water, rain, thunder, and storms. They had gods in charge of building, prayer, fertility, and every part of their existence."

She paused.

"The Maya had gods in charge of every action and every moment. Some gods had more than one responsibility; jobs overlapped—just to cover all the bases. This is the reason all the glyphs we find on their temples, pyramids, stelae, and parchments have calendrics along with the images. The ancient Maya were, quite literally, obsessed with time. They could not take the chance that every minute wasn't tended by at least one god in charge of some fragment of time...or it might stop."

Diego would probably never know why this woman was chosen. That was not the way of his people. Yet getting the seminar ticket to her had been the easy part. Making sure she got there would be more challenging. There were so many things to consider...an accident on the freeway, illness...

With God's help, he prayed silently. Then he added a prayer to the Blessed Virgin, certain the ancient gods of Maya would not be insulted by *how* he got their will done.

At the break, he slipped unobtrusively out the rear door.

Joe Magee carefully locked one of his cabinets of ancient artifacts. It was late Friday afternoon, and the crisp, fall sun sent shafts through the windows and across the floor of the great room. Once he completed the rounds, he flipped a switch, turning on the alarm system.

He stood at the kitchen window, hands resting on the sill, and gazed at his land. Lush woodlands covered a high plateau that led to three nearby foothills, one much higher than the other two. More hills were scattered beyond, abounding with wildlife. Except for the lodge and the big house where he lived, and the footpath that joined them, it looked as if no man or woman had ever ventured here. He'd been lucky to find this place.

Tomorrow was the seminar, just another in the series he chose to conduct from his home against the backdrop of the breathtaking Central Valley rim. Curiously enough, he felt nervous, but it probably wasn't the seminar itself...rather, the oddness of everything surrounding it.

He'd given numerous seminars on the pre-Columbian history of California as well as Central America, and he usually picked his own topics or ones related to the San Francisco Museum of American Antiquities presentations. Out of the blue, the museum board had asked him to give one focused solely on the Maya...not his specialty.

And there was the list of attendees the university e-mailed to him. Dr. Amy Parrish, the prevailing world expert on Maya, was among them, and he didn't possess half her specific knowledge on the subject. She had whipped up a planetary tempest with her search for the Maya, and, although he'd never met her, he'd read her research. Persuasive though it was, Magee remained unconvinced of the validity of her theories regarding the Mayan fate. It could be interesting with her in the audience.

Then there was the computer thing. Last night he was up late working on a model and noticed the monitor on his computer light up with activity. It was puzzling because he always put his PC in standby mode at the end of the day. He stopped to look and, on closer inspection, saw a listing of folders and files as if someone had pulled up a directory. But it was even more startling when a window appeared stating that one hundred percent of the file transfer had completed, then closed itself. What did that mean? He had pushed the standby button again, made a mental note to contact his cousin, and decided to call it quits on his model for the night.

Magee now sat at the long table and tried to work on his talk. Pre-Columbian America was his passion and the seminars he conducted for the museum were an easy part of his life, but today there was simply too much distraction. He fiddled with his pencil then set it down and wandered into the kitchen to pour himself a glass of fresh juice made from a machine that was a birthday gift from his parents two years before.

He had disappointed them from the beginning. He climbed pyramids and trekked through the jungles of Central America instead of attending dental school. He brought back artifacts and fossils and built meticulous scale models of ancient cities and gave lectures around the world about lost cultures. His pursuit of lost generations supplanted any other, and his parents finally accepted the fact their younger son would not be a dentist, either. But he knew he had disappointed them.

At thirty-two, Magee never planned to leave his woodland not far from civilization on the rim of the great Central Valley of California. He looked back at his notes, pondering tomorrow, and all the issues that threatened his serenity.

Amy Parrish was nervous. Tomorrow was the lecture, and the prospect of meeting Joseph Magee was a little intimidating. She spent hours trying to decide what to wear and, somewhere around midnight, gave up and threw a bag of popcorn into the microwave.

Her roommate, Elaine Buchbinder, glanced at the clothes strewn about the apartment. She undid her dark braid and re-braided it, unsatisfied with the initial result, as she sat cross-legged on the loveseat in the front room of the two-bedroom unit and watched. Elaine had given up reading; it was far more entertaining to watch her friend.

"Look, Amy, are you getting ready for a hot date or a cold, boring, technical, scientific seminar? Help me with this," she asked, finally satisfied with her hair and twisting a band around the base of the braid.

"You don't understand. This is *the* Joseph Magee. My hero."

"Get a grip, Amy. I don't wig out at dental conventions. We all clean and restore teeth. This guy doesn't do anything you haven't done. He digs up fossils, he studies human history, he *uses his brains*, just like *you*. Have you ever met him or do you know anything about him?"

"No, I've only seen him from the back of a dark, crowded auditorium. Nobody knows very much about him because he's very private; he doesn't even allow photos with his articles. It's just that he's doing a seminar on *my* Maya, and that makes me feel like a high school student."

"That's probably because he's so old. Calm down. Hair in a French twist; beige suit, beige shoes. Be conservative."

There were butterflies in Amy's stomach early Saturday morning when she started off in her brother's old Chevy, its cylinders pumping hard and spewing out pollution through dual exhausts. Thank goodness it was an automatic transmission and had power steering.

She stopped for gas and waved to her friend Ben Pawloski, also pumping gas, who called to her that he was headed for Joseph Magee's seminar. Ben mentioned the names of their three mutual friends who were also going.

Amy stared in disbelief at her friend and then at the number of gallons of gas her brother's car was drinking. She left the tank filling and walked over to Pawloski who was cleaning his windows.

"I've been on his waiting list for two years now, and you don't want to know what I had to do to get this ticket. How come you guys got them so easily?"

Ben laughed and pushed his glasses back onto the bridge of his nose. His hair had been neatly combed this morning, but now the thick mass of dark hair was rumpled, like his clothes which Amy was sure had been pressed before he donned them. He was tall and lanky, and Amy had a theory about his active brain and a connection between that vibrancy and the deterioration of his appearance as the day wore on.

"Sylvia's boyfriend got the flu so she took his ticket. When she went down to the university to register late on Wednesday, they told her the museum said there were a few cancellations and did she want any more tickets. She checked the list, saw your name already there, and took enough tickets so we could all go together. We thought we'd surprise you."

"You did," she replied and nodded, then relayed her tale of favors that prised the ticket from her brother's hand.

When they parted, Parrish felt certain she would get there first with all the side trips Ben had to make. The directions she had were simple. After going north on one freeway and east on another, she was almost there. Or thought she was. The exit sign to Peruvia had no distance to the town listed. There had been a space for the number, but someone had long ago marked it out with white tape.

The road off the freeway had two lanes that were gravelly and not recently oiled, and it seemed interminable. Its beginning was marked by a large, brightly lit used car lot, but five minutes onto the road, she hadn't reached the town, seven miles beyond which was Magee's home and the seminar. She was alone on the road and wondered if she had somehow taken a wrong turn.

She passed many acres of graze land, some of the last grasslands in the Central Valley. The low foothills, dotted with farmhouses, created a rolling, velvety-tan backdrop to the valley flatlands as the fall rains had not yet arrived to turn them green. The dry, hot air of the California summer had lingered on into the autumn months. She wondered briefly how long it would be until these lands, too, went the way of developers.

Thoughts of the seminar broke into her consciousness, nagging at what made her nervous. It wasn't just Magee. It was the ease with which her brother had gotten the ticket and the shivering feeling she had of being followed on the way home from the lecture, by someone always just out of her sight. James told her she was crazy.

Then there was Joseph Magee's topic. He had never focused on the Maya. She wondered what could have prompted his shift from the Olmec, his notoriously favorite pre-Columbian people. Did he know enough about the Maya to conduct this seminar?

Amy did. She could talk for days on the Maya, perhaps weeks. From the first pyramid she'd seen in high school when her family had traveled to the Yucatan during summer vacation, Amy had been hooked on this strange and remarkable civilization with their sloping foreheads and squared-off hieroglyphics. It became her mission in life to find out where the Maya had gone when their dominance vanished from Central America in the ninth century, long before the Spaniards arrived.

This obsession pressed her to read and study everything written and listen to every word spoken about the Maya in hopes that somewhere a clue would surface. She hadn't found the answers yet and remained unsatisfied with her slow progress. Today, her quest brought her to the small town of Peruvia, California, to attend a seminar given by a scholar on her life's work. She was filled with hope.

Just as the faded sign welcoming her to Peruvia loomed, one of the Impala's tires blew out on the dusty road and the car swerved, almost out of control. Amy skidded to a halt without the aid of power brakes by the edge of a ditch. In frustration, she got out of the car and stood staring at the flat tire, silently cursing her brother for buying cheap tires. He'd spent so much money on the interior upholstery and exterior gingerbread of this car, he hadn't any left over for good tires.

And she wondered if this was yet another omen. The hairs were prickling on the back of her neck and had been the entire time she was on the road to Peruvia. She gave herself a shake and unlocked the big trunk. The size of the jack surprised her.

Beside one of the several huge rolls of hay in a nearby field, a small, dark man sat motionless, observing her. He made no move to help her but watched as she unsuccessfully tried to change the tire herself. He had seen her coming from a distance through his binoculars and relayed the information on his cell phone. He had not been the first, nor was he the last. Two more waited on the far side of town, near Magee's place.

As Parrish gave up fumbling with the impossible lug nuts, she tossed the jack in the back seat and slowly drove off on a rim and three tires. The man made another call.