

# Leap of Faith

A Phaze Samba Short by

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Phaze

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## *One*

Kira de la Fuente hung on to the ropes for dear life as the boards creaked beneath her feet. While she wasn't afraid of heights, trusting suspension bridges made of wood and rope was not high on her list of pleasant pastimes, even if the structure seemed sturdy and well maintained. She kept imagining herself falling off and plummeting a hundred feet to her death. Luis, her erstwhile Peruvian tour guide, was on the other side of the gorge with their llamas. She'd made him cross first with the animals to make sure the bridge could take the weight.

"¡Andale!" he shouted. "It is dark soon." He was tying something to his saddle. She couldn't tell what it was from this distance, but it glinted golden.

Kira went as quickly as possible, ignoring the flashes of the rushing river that she caught between the slats. A fog crept steadily through the gorge like a living thing. Soon it would block the view of the river completely, leaving the impression that the chasm was bottomless.

She wondered if she should have booked the luxury tour with the train up to Machu Picchu instead of this off-the-beaten-track "immersion tour." Although she'd been born and raised in California, she was one quarter Peruvian and the Inca civilization had always fascinated her. Supposedly, genuine Incan lodgings awaited her at the end of the trail, and for the next three days, she would eat authentic food and learn about the culture and language from someone dressed in period costume.

But ever since they'd started out early that morning, her surly tour guide hadn't stopped hounding her to keep up. Clearly, he expected his customers to be expert llama riders, but Kira loved animals and wasn't comfortable kicking her llama as hard as he wanted her to. Her efforts to urge it forward using words and pats on its fluffy neck hadn't worked. The later it got, the more agitated Luis had become. Finally, he had grabbed the reins from her and dragged her mount behind him, muttering to himself all the while. He obviously cared little about customer service and she intended to lodge a complaint.

At last, Kira made it to the other side of the bridge. As she stepped onto the dirt path, a wave of dizziness swept over her and her vision wavered as if she were passing through a wall of water without getting wet. Damned altitude. She'd arrived in Cuzco two days ago and spent most of her time acclimatizing herself to the high elevation. Thanks to the *mate de coca* tea the hotel served and the suggested restful day in bed, she thought she'd avoided the extreme nausea and headaches many tourists succumbed to, but obviously she hadn't.

Intending to get to her canteen, she pushed past Luis and the animals, but she noticed her pack on the ground, not on the back of her llama where it had been tied. She also saw now the item he'd tied to his saddle was a small golden figurine.

"What's the deal with my pack?" she said angrily. "Are we camping here? I thought you said it wasn't far."

Luis' eyes darted to the path ahead that curved around sharply. His anger seemed to have dissipated and he looked worried as he mounted his llama, the reins of Kira's llama in his grimy hand.

"You go," he said, pointing. "Follow the trail. There will be food there and a fire."

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Then, unbelievably, he kicked his mount into a trot back across the bridge, towing her llama behind him.

"Hey, wait a minute! Where do you think you're going?"

Luis didn't answer. Instead, he urged the llamas to go faster. Shocked that he was deserting her, she stared at his rapidly retreating figure for a moment before running after him, yelling for him to stop. The bridge shook as she chased him, but about three-quarters of the way across, she tripped. Her head struck the wood of a vertical support, sending a shard of pain through her skull.

She came to about fifteen minutes later. When she sat up, dizzy, something warm trickled down her temple. She touched her head where she'd hit it and saw blood on her fingers. Panic rose inside her as she realized the gravity of her situation. She was stranded in the wilds of Peru, miles from civilization. She had virtually no provisions. No shelter. And who knew what kind of wild animals roamed these mountains?

## *Two*

Taking a deep breath, Kira told herself to get a grip. She wasn't a brainless twit. She was intelligent and resourceful. She would survive this. All she had to do was stay calm and think.

As she got to her feet, she assessed her options. She could go the way the guide had pointed and try to find the ruins on her own. If there even were ruins. Or she could try to find one of the way houses Incan travelers made use of when journeying themselves.

The sun was almost down now and a chill wind swept up from the gorge, making her shiver. Soon it would be dark. The temperature would drop dramatically. June meant winter here in the Southern Hemisphere, so her main concern was keeping warm, and for that she'd need her pack.

Mustering her courage, she started back across the bridge. She was about three yards from the end when she saw a man striding down the path toward her. With his robe billowing out behind him, he looked like he'd stepped off the pages of a history book. Beneath the robe he wore a belted, knee-length tunic, and his thick black hair hung to his shoulders.

Thank God, she thought. She had begun to suspect that the entire tour company was a scam, but maybe she'd been right in the first place: Luis was just an idiot.

When the man got to the bridge, he stopped. "Where is that fool Luis?" His voice rumbled deeply, like thunder in a vast canyon and seemed to settle inside her bones.

"He took off and left me!" she said.

The man cursed in Quechua, the language of the Andean region. Then he looked at her and swore again.

"You are bleeding!" he exclaimed. He started to walk forward, but glanced down and suddenly stopped short, mid-step.

Keeping both feet on the stone-paved path, he held out his hand. "I cannot go farther. Please, come the rest of the way and I will tend to your injury."

Puzzled, Kira hesitated.

"Come. I give you my word. I will take care of you."

Kira heard and felt his earnestness, and something about the way he stood, the way he continued to hold his hand out to her made her believe him.

Determined to make the best of things, not to mention getting her money's worth, she trudged forward. On the far side of the chasm, he hooked her pack over his shoulder and waited patiently.

When she stepped off the bridge, again she felt a wave of dizziness and stumbled.

The man acted immediately, scooping Kira up in his arms, then turning about to head back the way he had come.

"Hey!" she said, clinging to his neck as he strode off. "I can walk."

"No. You are hurt and unsteady," he said in a tone that brooked no argument. Not that she wanted to argue. She was dead tired, her head throbbed, and damn it, as politically incorrect as it might be, a visceral feminine satisfaction hummed inside her because a big, strong man had swept her off her feet like she weighed nothing.

Kira could see little in the growing darkness, but despite his grunts of effort as he climbed the trail, her rescuer seemed to have no trouble navigating the rough terrain. Before long she detected

a glow coming from the windows of a small stone building. Darkness had fallen and she knew she probably wouldn't have found this place on her own with the small flashlight she had brought. Once inside, her rescuer crossed the room and lowered her gently to the bed, a primitive but comfortable looking mattress sitting on a broad stone platform. She sat upright since the platform stood at about chair height.

The cottage was cozy, with a wooden table and two chairs, the bed, and shelves carved into the stone walls. Wooden shutters covered windows on each of the four walls, and a fire burned in the hearth.

The man regarded her with dark, deep set eyes. He had the strong coarse features of a native Peruvian—a broad, severe brow, prominent nose, full lips. His hair, she noticed now, hung in tight black spirals, and his cheeks and jaw bore an austere shadow from a day's growth.

"Please, allow me to tend your injury." He spoke strangely, but she supposed it was part of the authentic atmosphere she was paying for.

When she nodded, he examined her scalp. For a man of his size, he was surprisingly gentle. He had dark skin and he smelled spicy, like herbs, maybe.

"The cut is not deep," he said, fetching a clean cloth and hot water from a kettle.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"I am called Amaru," he said, dabbing at the cut with the dampened cloth.

"I'm Kira. Kira de la Fuente. Thank you for rescuing me. I'm sure I would have gotten lost if you hadn't found me."

"The guide was supposed to have brought you here to me."

"Luis?" Kira scoffed. "He's the worst tour guide I've ever had. He bullied me all day."

Amaru brought his head up sharply. "Did he strike you? Is that how you were hurt?" he asked, scowling.

"Of course not. He just acted more like I worked for him than the other way around. If I were you, I'd fire him and get someone who knows how to treat the guests."

"Luis is a superstitious fool with nothing but potatoes for brains and payment for duties he did not perform." Amaru's mouth tightened. "I, however, will treat you like one favored by the gods."

Despite the potato remark, Kira was struck by Amaru's oddly grave manner. He spoke as if all he wanted in life was to see to her every wish. Not that she was complaining. Far from it. In fact, his gentle touch as he finished cleaning her cut sent shivers of sensation through her.

"Are you hungry?" he asked as he rinsed the cloth and hung it on a wooden peg embedded in the wall.

"I'm starving." At that moment she finally registered a tantalizing aroma and her mouth watered. He handed a bowl of thick stew to her along with some bread and a spoon. It tasted like chicken, but a little gamier than the kind she got in the supermarket. He also gave her a drink that turned out to be mildly alcoholic, like beer but with a more subtle flavor. From the research she'd done to prepare for the trip, she knew it was chicha.

After serving her, instead of sitting in the chair that stood near the bed, he knelt on the floor, his robe spread behind him.

"Don't you have to go look in on the other guests?" she asked.

"No. You are the only one. But it is good, because this way I can give you all my attention."

Using the bread to sop up the gravy, she pondered this news. Being the singular focus of this man's attention could be pretty nice considering how good looking he was and how considerate he'd been, but then again, she only met him not more than an hour ago.

"Tomorrow I will show you the hot springs," he said. "Most likely you will feel stiff and sore in the morning."

"I'm already pretty achy. I thought some extra hours at the gym would prepare me for this trip, but I was so wrong."

"I am skilled in massage. If you would like, I can soothe your aches now."

Kira cocked her head. "Is there an extra charge for that?"

"No. You have only to ask me at anytime and I will oblige."

She thought that more likely they did charge extra, but that Amaru was trying to make up for Luis' screw up. Not that it mattered. Who in their right mind would refuse free massages?

"I'd actually love a massage. Right here on the bed?"

"Yes, but perhaps you would you like to bathe first. You cannot immerse yourself like you will at the hot springs, but I have hot water and a basin you can stand in."

Kira smiled. "That sounds wonderful, actually. Bring it on."

He took her bowl and spoon and put it on a shelf, then filled a large metal tub with hot water. The idea of washing off the dust from the day's journey, not to mention the eau de llama, sounded like heaven.

"Here are towels for washing and a larger one that you may use to cover yourself afterward. Call me when you are ready. I will be just outside."

After Amaru left, Kira undressed. As she washed, she remembered the movie *Witness*, where Harrison Ford had watched the Amish woman take a sponge bath. What a provocative scene that was. Although the door and window shutters were shut tight, Amaru could peek in through a crack and she'd never know. Thinking about him spying on her sent a shiver of arousal through her.

When she finished, she stepped out of the tub and wrapped the big towel around herself.

"I'm done," she called, and Amaru reentered the house.

"Should I lie on the bed?"

He shook his head, hanging up his robe and getting a vial from the hearth shelf. "I will begin with your feet and legs. It will be easier if you sit."

Kira took a seat on the edge of the sleeping platform, tucking the end of the towel more firmly between her breasts. Amaru knelt before her, clad only in his tunic and sandals. He poured a small amount of liquid into his palm and rubbed his hands together.

"This is balsam oil."

"It smells great. It reminds me of..." She trailed off into a groan as he began to rub her foot. "Oh. My. God. That is the most wonderful thing I've ever felt in my whole life. Whatever you do, don't stop."

"Not until you command me to."

She laughed. "You keep talking to me like you're my slave or something. It makes me feel like a queen."

Amaru's hands stilled for a moment. "For the next three days, you are a queen and I am your humble slave."

He pressed his thumbs in slow, tiny circles against the soles of her foot. Sensation pulsed upward and through her body like an incoming tide. The tension from the day melted away, leaving behind a tingling lassitude, but as he moved up to her calf, the sensations slowly slid into desire. It centered between her legs with a warm throbbing and her breasts tingled. She wondered what he intended and how far those marvelous hands were going to roam.

As he released one leg to start on the other, a fantasy of the two of them naked on the bed flickered in her head. His big body covered hers as he parted her legs and slid into her. She almost felt it, the fullness of his thick cock, the slippery tug as he pulled out and stroked inside again.

Kira's heart beat faster as their eyes met. Something in his dark gaze told her he knew what she felt and longed for it, too, but despite the strong attraction, she had to get a hold of herself. Amaru was a complete stranger. Having sex with him would be like ordering room service and screwing the guy who delivered it.

With a slight smile, Amaru gave her a nod that seemed to indicate he understood her decision. Slowly, he let go of her leg and gestured for her to lie down, and when she had arranged herself on her stomach, her towel covering her behind, he climbed onto the broad bed. There was some movement behind her as he arranged himself near her feet, his knees on either side of her ankles. He placed his hands on the back of one of her thighs and resumed rubbing. God, he was good at this. The pressure, the glide of his hands over her skin was as close to ecstasy as a person could get without coming, but she was determined to take the high road. Sex with the masseur was so cliché.

After about forty blissful minutes, Kira teetered on the edge of drowsy oblivion. He'd massaged her thighs and arms until they felt like jelly, bypassed her butt and worked on her back. Now she was nothing but a boneless lump of lassitude. She didn't open her eyes, but she managed to say, "Your queen is about to fall into a deep sleep, but she is most pleased, Amaru."

"Then I am pleased."

"What time do we start tomorrow?" she asked.

"At your leisure," he replied, slowly removing his hands from her shoulders.

"So, I can sleep in?"

"As long as you wish."

Amaru got off the bed and Kira opened her eyes to see him kneel by her head. "We do nothing without your consent."

Again, she got the feeling like there was an underlying meaning to what he said. His expression was so earnest, and his eyes were black with a mystery she couldn't decipher.

\* \* \*

Amaru closed the door to the cottage behind him, leaving Kira to her rest. He had a good feeling about her. A very good feeling. Despite the fact that the fool Luis had let his superstitions get the best of him and abandoned her at the bridge, Amaru hoped that Kira was the one.

She was young, only in her second decade of life, and surprisingly, she closely resembled Nima, the young woman he had wronged so long ago. Kira's dark hair, while not as long, framed her face in familiar, soft, black waves. She had the same earth-brown eyes, and her pink lips reminded him of the orchid that bloomed near the temple. Although the towel had covered her for

the most part, he easily imagined her naked body would be as beautiful and desirable as Nima's. And her name meant "sunlight."

As he walked toward the llama pasture, Amaru thought of what lay ahead. Three days to serve her. Three days to earn her trust and to gain consent for the full use of her body. Her willingness was the key; she had to give herself to him without reservation. He knew she desired him. He had become adept at gauging the depth of women's attraction to him, and Kira had been aroused. He thanked the god Inti for the fact that she had been on her stomach and unable to see his erection. He'd had to position himself strategically so that it did not brush up against her as he kneaded her muscles. Even now, his cock hardened as he thought about her naked. His hands had itched to clutch her round buttocks, so tempting beneath the thin cloth. But if he'd learned anything, he'd learned to resist temptation and rein in his lustful impulses. Nothing was gained by haste.

Besides he had a long night ahead of him. All of the llamas slept except Capi. A glance under her tail told him she would probably give birth tonight, but her soft bleats and restless pacing told him something wasn't quite right. Judging from the stars he had at least six hours before sunrise, most of which he would spend here, watching over the expectant mother, but at dawn he would go to the temple to pray to Inti.

If all went as planned, after over four centuries, he would finally be free. Free to do what, he didn't know. To die most likely. But if death was his reward, so be it. He had long ago come to realize that life without other people, and more specifically without a woman to share it with, was empty. He would welcome an end to the loneliness with gratitude.



## *Three*

When Kira woke the next morning, her muscles protested, having stiffened overnight, but if it hadn't been for Amaru's magic hands, she probably would have been unable to move at all. Too bad the part of her that had suffered the most from the llama ride he hadn't touched at all.

To her surprise, she saw clothes laid out on the table. Assuming they were for her, she put them on. Woven of a soft, brightly colored wool, the loose dress fell to her ankles. She tied a matching sash at her waist and slipped on a pair of soft leather shoes. Feeling devilish, but telling herself she wanted to go the authentic route, she went braless. She even took off her watch, which didn't seem to be working anyway. The last item was a wide brimmed straw hat.

Wanting Amaru to take a picture of her, she dug her camera out of her pack, but it wouldn't turn on.

"Well, that's just shitty," she said aloud. She could have sworn she'd charged up the battery before she left home. There was obviously no shop up here where she could buy batteries. No electrical outlets either. She was screwed.

Thinking Amaru might have a camera himself, she ventured outside. Perhaps the tour company had a set-up like amusement parks did these days, taking no-obligation photographs of the guests which they sold at inflated prices. Kira decided it didn't matter how much they charged, she wanted pictures.

Outside, she saw the village for the first time. When Amaru had carried her last night, it had been too dark to see anything. The beauty of the settlement took her by surprise. She had imagined crumbled rocks and dirt everywhere with little vegetation, but green grass grew abundantly. Flowers lined the stone path leading from her little cottage. A short distance away she saw a kitchen garden with neat rows of vegetables and greens, and when she investigated the sound of running water, she found, not a stream, but a narrow stone aqueduct that emerged from the face of a hill. How amazing to see in real life what she'd only seen in books. Putting her hands into the gushing flow, she washed her face. She wouldn't drink any unless Amaru said it was safe. She didn't want a case of Montezuma's Revenge.

"Or Inti's Revenge," she muttered, remembering that Montezuma was Mayan and Inti was Incan.

"Inti's Revenge?" Amaru said, startling her.

She turned to explain but saw he had blood all over his hands and forearms. His tunic bore dark stains as well, and he looked exhausted.

"Oh, my God! What happened to you? Are you hurt?"

"I am fine. One of the llamas had a difficult birth last night."

To her shock, he stripped off his tunic to reveal a loincloth. Holy crap. Even covered with gore, he was beautiful.

Sometimes what seemed enchanting at night lost its glamour by light of day, especially when it came to men, but Amaru looked even sexier this morning. The scrap of cloth covering his privates only emphasized his prime physique. The man was all muscle, not a scrap of fat on him. He could easily pose for the cover of one of those erotic e-books Kira occasionally enjoyed.

As he set about washing himself, she went back to her cottage and got the towels she'd used the night before.

"What happened with the birth?" she asked, handing him a towel.

He gave her a grateful look and did a much more efficient job of getting the gunk off his arms.

"Usually the head and both forelegs emerge first, but this stubborn little one had one of his legs still stuck inside."

"Is he okay now?"

"Yes," he said. His muscled chest expanded as he heaved a great sigh. "Mother and cria are fine now."

"Can I see them?"

"If that is your wish," he said, smiling.

Amaru thrust his head under the stream and washed his face, then combed his hands through his hair. The water ran in rivulets down his body, which sparkled in the sunlight. God, he was gorgeous. Open mouthed, she handed him the second towel.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked as he dried off.

Quickly, she tried to replace her gawking expression with a casual one. "Oh, slept like a rock. I don't think an earthquake would have woken me up."

"I see you found the clothing." With a slight smile he looked her over and she flushed under his attention. "Your beauty puts orchids to shame."

He stepped closer, the sunlight glinting off droplets of water in his hair and on his broad, muscular shoulders. Kira's heartbeat quickened and she couldn't seem to tear her gaze from his.

"The moon will not want to show herself tonight for fear of you outshining her."

Coming from any other man, that would have sounded corny. In fact, Kira wondered how many women he must have used this line on. Dozens, probably, but for some reason she didn't really care. He managed to infuse his words with sincerity that reached inside her and made her want to lay back in the soft grass and lift up her dress. She wanted nothing more than to make love with this man in the morning sunshine, even if he was a Peruvian Casanova.

\* \* \*

After breakfast, Amaru brought her to see his small herd of llamas. She squealed with excitement when he led her right up to the new mother, who nuzzled Amaru as the baby nursed. Kira fell in love with the newborn and couldn't believe that the mother allowed her to pet him, but she did.

"Hey," Kira said, "look at that brown mark. It sort of looks like the sun."

"What?"

Amaru blinked and examined the baby's left hind leg. Near the knee, the baby had a circular dark patch of fur with five lines resembling rays of sunlight.

An amazed smile spread across Amaru's face and he nodded. "If my own eyes did not tell me so, I would not have believed it."

Having drunk his fill, the cria wobbled about on spindly legs. Kira walked alongside, cooing and encouraging him. Eventually he trotted around a bit making Kira laugh with joy. Lifting her

skirts, she frolicked with him. When the baby bumped into her, knocking her harmlessly to the soft grass, Amaru ran to help her up and then joined in the play himself. But the calf soon tired, seeming to run out of juice like a switch had been flipped. He folded up his gangly legs, collapsed near his mother and fell asleep.

"That was so much fun," Kira exclaimed, plopping down herself to lean against the fence. Amaru handed her a water skin and she drank. "I love babies."

"Do you have children?" Amaru asked, sitting next to her.

"Not now, but someday," she replied, handing him back the water skin. "I have to get a husband first."

"May Inti grant you many babies and a good man to provide for them. You deserve the great happiness that a family can bring."

"Do you have a family?" she asked.

All at once, his mood shifted. Even though the sun shone down, it was as if a dark cloud had moved over him. "No," he said, lifting his face to the sky. "I have not been allowed that."

"But you'd like a family, right?" she asked with a slight frown. "A wife and children?"

"I would trade a lifetime, ten lifetimes, for just one day of being a father and husband. But it is not my destiny, I'm afraid. Such joy is for men more deserving."

With that, he stood and walked away, the subject apparently closed.

\* \* \*

After packing food and water for their short journey to the hot springs, they set off. Even with her sore behind, Kira consented to riding. Amaru led Pikka, her llama, with a pliable rope, but the animal didn't need much guidance and followed him willingly.

As they made their way, she pelted Amaru with questions about Inca culture and he answered them, but she noted that he fell into character when he did so, pretending that he was one of the ancients himself. She had experienced this type of thing before in Colonial Williamsburg, but Amaru took it a step further by peppering his explanations with fictional anecdotes from childhood. He had a gift for storytelling. His low, gravelly voice wove a spell around her until she almost believed the tales he told had really happened.

They arrived at the hot springs around midday. Kira tried to etch the view in her memory since Amaru had confirmed he didn't have a camera. The vista was so captivatingly perfect that it seemed computer generated. As in the village, green grass and vibrant flowers brightened an otherwise barren landscape. Deep stone depressions, worn smooth by time, held steaming pools of clear water. The blue sky stretched above, vibrant and vast, and below, ribbons of rivers and streams flowed through the deep valleys like molten silver.

"This view is unbelievable. I don't even have words to describe how beautiful it is."

"We have a phrase in Quechua for that. When you feel something so wonderful you cannot bear it, you say, 'hatun hawa, altu aypu', which means 'as big as the sky and as high as the clouds.'"

Amaru placed his large hands on her waist to help her dismount. Again, she felt a feminine thrill at how easily he bore her weight. To her slight disappointment he didn't hold on to her any longer than necessary.

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He spread a thick blanket on the grass and set up an ingenious shelter of poles and fabric. Pikka grazed nearby, untethered. Lunch consisted of cold duck, bread, a tangy cheese, and more chicha. After the meal, Amaru told her the story of the origin of the world, but his warm voice soothed her and with her stomach full, she drifted to sleep without hearing the end.

## *Four*

Kira woke a couple of hours later. Under the shelter he'd built, Amaru slept next to her, his great chest rising and falling. Remembering how he had stayed up all night with the llamas, she turned on her side carefully, not wanting to disturb him.

She thought about what he'd said earlier about not deserving a wife and family and wondered what had he done that made him believe that. Everything she'd seen of him so far argued the opposite. He was kind, protective, generous of spirit. She'd never met a man with whom she felt more safe...even cherished. In fact, he had treated her so respectfully and with such care that she realized that she very much wanted to take things further after all.

Having made her decision, her heart beat much faster now. The sun had disappeared completely behind a layer of clouds and a fog crept up the hill, or perhaps it was steam from the hot springs. Kira scooted closer, raised herself on an elbow, and touched her lips to his, once, twice. He stirred and opened his eyes with a slight smile.

Suddenly unsure what to say, she hoped her actions had spoken for her, and when he caressed her cheek softly and pulled her back for another kiss, she knew he understood. His lips were warm against hers and she sighed as he cradled her close, wrapping an arm around her. He took his time exploring her mouth, tasting her lips but keeping the kiss from getting too deep. The afternoon called for lazy lovemaking, so she let the feelings roll through her like waves in a secluded lagoon. But soon her desire for more built, and when she slid her leg over his, wanting to climb on top of him, he stopped her.

"What's wrong?" she asked, confused. She knew he was aroused. One look at the tent in the front of his tunic made that clear.

"I want to join with you, Kira," he said earnestly. "I want that very much."

"Then why are we stopping?"

He took her hand kissed it reverently. "I must tell you something first. Another story. A story that will be difficult to believe but is the truth."

Kira nodded, strangely relieved. Ever since she'd stepped off the bridge the night before, a feeling of anticipation had hummed inside her. Every so often, Amaru would say or do something that heightened an expectation that events were unfolding in a way that she didn't understand but soon would. Now, it seemed the time had come and she welcomed it.

"Just tell me," she said.

Nodding, he took a deep breath. "When I was young, I mistakenly believed that because I had been born to privilege that I deserved everything I wanted. If it was not given to me, I took it. Because my family was powerful, no one ever tried to stop me. Most of the time, I did not push the limits. I knew what I could get away with, and I did not overstep those bounds. But one day, I did.

"There was a girl, a beautiful girl. Her name was Nima. Her family was not of high social standing, but her father was determined to change this. For years he petitioned for his youngest daughter to be a Sun Virgin, and due to her father's diligent efforts and Nima's inherent goodness, eventually the priests chose her to serve Inti in the temple.

Amaru sighed. "Unfortunately, I had also chosen her. Because of my looks and my social

standing, almost never did a woman refuse me if I made an advance. But Nima did. She believed herself to be reserved for the Sun God, Inti, which she was. I was arrogant and selfish enough to put this fact aside. I wanted her for myself, therefore I would have her, regardless of what the temple priests had decreed.

"At first, she resisted. Being a Sun Virgin was a tremendous honor and Nima was a girl of high morals, but I pursued her day after day, until she agreed to meet me at a way house a good distance from the village. There, after hours of merciless cajoling and begging, kissing and caressing, she finally gave in. I did my best to give her pleasure, but she did not enjoy herself and afterward, she cried."

Amaru sat up and Kira followed suit, turning to face him. He met her eyes briefly.

"By then I did feel some remorse. I told her that the priests would never know what we had done if we said nothing. But a few months later, it was discovered that she was with child. The priests cast her out of the temple, disgraced. Everyone in her family shunned her except for her sister, Qinti. For three days she lived in the way house where we had lain together. Qinti and I secretly brought her food, but on the morning of the Sun Festival, Qinti came to me, frantic. Nima had gone to the bridge. Somehow I knew what she planned to do. We ran as quickly as we could, but not quickly enough. Just as we rounded the bend, we saw Nima send her ceremonial kisses to the sun, and leap off the bridge."

The pain in Amaru's black eyes was so acute, Kira had to look away. Unthinkingly, she took his hand in hers as he continued his tale.

"Qinti's screams of denial echoed in the canyon. I ran to the spot where Nima had jumped, but the fog prevented me from seeing anything. Qinti called me a murderer. She ran back to her family home. They had not been permitted to attend the festival. When she told them what had happened, her father and brothers came to the bridge where I had remained, still shocked and numb. I did not fight back as they beat me. When I was almost dead, they lifted me up over their shoulders and threw me off. As I fell, Qinti called on Inti to punish me, too."

Amaru took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

"So you found yourself here in this limbo place," Kira said, understanding, and even more incredibly, believing. "You've been here ever since."

"Yes. Once a year, during the Sun Festival, Inti gives me the chance to atone, but my fate rests in the hands of the woman who comes to me. After I confess my crime to her, she is my judge. If she does not accept me, I must wait another year. If she accepts me—allows me into her body willingly and without reservation—Inti permits me to walk onto the bridge and make the leap."

"And no one has ever accepted you?" she asked.

"Oh, no, many have accepted me, but in the end it is Inti's decision, and he has never allowed me to die. I land at the bottom of the chasm, broken and bleeding. It is many days that I remain there, but eventually my body heals and I make my way back up to the village."

Kira stared at him, stunned. He regarded her with a resigned expression, his lips in a tight line.

"You need time to decide, of course," he said as he got out from under the shelter. "I bid you remain here to make use of the hot springs. Pikka will take you back. She knows the way and you saw that the path is an easy one. You can even see the village from here."

"At sunset tonight you will find a basket of flowers on the doorstep. Leaving them there will

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indicate a refusal, and you will not have to see me again. In that case, come dawn, you will find gold to repay you for your time and what you spent on the tour.

"But if you choose to accept the flowers..." Amaru stepped back, his hand over his heart. "Then it will be my honor to come to you tonight."

## *Five*

The fabric of the shelter fluttered as a chill breeze blew through, and steam from the hot springs mingled with the fog that crept up the mountainside, partially obscuring Amaru's figure as he made his way down the mountain. He walked with his back straight, but even having only known him less than twenty-four hours, Kira could discern an almost imperceptible slump to his shoulders.

She took his advice, removing her clothes and slipping into one of the pools. She hoped the steam and hot water would settle her mind, which whirled with everything he had told her. She suddenly understood so much: the malfunction of her camera and wristwatch, why there were no other guests, why Luis had been so afraid to accompany her farther than the bridge. And Amaru's amazing knowledge and strange manner made sense now. No wonder he could answer any question she had about the ancient Incas. He was one himself.

Kira took a deep breath and slid down until water closed over her head. She stayed there for a long moment, trying to reconcile her feelings about him. He hadn't really raped Nima, but the girl hadn't exactly been totally willing either. Kira knew from experience how much pressure a boy could put on a girl when he wanted sex, and clearly, Amaru had behaved abominably.

And yet, hadn't he suffered enough? Not only was he stuck in this freaky purgatory, he had to deal with the blood of Nima and their baby on his hands. Talk about a living hell.

Kira resurfaced and wiped the water from her eyes, having made her decision. Amaru obviously regretted his actions. She heard the shame in every word as he told his story, and the guilt and remorse in his eyes broke her heart. As far as Kira was concerned, Amaru had paid for his crime many times over.

\* \* \*

As the sun kissed the western horizon, Amaru fell to his knees and prayed as he did every evening. He expressed his shame over what he had done to Nima and his unborn child. He declared his gratitude to all the women who had come to him on the mountain, whether they accepted or rejected him. And finally, he beseeched his god to show mercy and grant him peace.

All was in readiness. The flowers had been picked and put in place. Amaru had washed and groomed himself meticulously, changed the bedding in her house, and left a feast there. Whether he would be sharing it with her, he did not know. Even after all this time, he could never predict what each individual woman would do. He could only wait and see. He was never really certain what he hoped would happen either, because if the woman accepted him, then he had to face the bridge ordeal. Rejection meant another year of waiting, but it also meant he did not have to throw himself onto the rocks of the chasm.

When the last ray of sunlight disappeared, he rose and went to see what Kira had decided.

His heart leapt when he saw the basket was gone. She wanted him. In spite of his monstrous past, she wanted him. And he wanted her. The strength of his longing for her scared him. In his experience, the higher one's hopes, the farther one had to fall. He tried to forget how Kira resembled Nima from long ago. He told himself that it was only coincidence that "Kira" meant "sunlight" in



Quechua, and that the sun-shaped mark on the baby llama was nothing more than a coincidence of nature. Nothing would be gained by dwelling upon these occurrences. He needed to focus on pleasuring Kira, guiding her to as much physical ecstasy as she could stand. Tomorrow would come soon enough.

Swallowing hard, he entered the house. Kira had been sitting on the chair, but she stood hastily as he closed the door behind him. She wore the dress without the belt. Her feet were bare and he noticed she had a gold ring around one of her toes. Silky hair fell around her beautiful face, but she looked nervous.

"Hi," she said. "I lit a fire. It only took me about seven tries."

He smiled and stepped closer. "A fire is good. It gets very cold here."

"And lonely," she said, tilting her head to look up at him.

"Yes," he said, bending to touch his forehead to hers. "Very lonely." Then he drew back and cupped her face in his hands. "Kira, I want you to know how grateful I am. You give me a priceless gift tonight for which I can never..."

She cut him off by throwing her arms around his neck and fastening her lips to his.

It was like setting a match to tinder. His lust for her ignited. He seized her head and thrust his tongue into her mouth. She welcomed it with a moan. He forgot all about his curse and the bridge. Every fiber of his being focused on Kira and the feel of her mouth, how her breasts pressed against his body, the softness of her buttocks as he clutched them with eager hands. Nothing existed but this woman giving herself to him without reservation, knowing what a monster he had been and not caring.

Stepping back, he grasped the hem of her dress and pulled it over her head. As he flung it aside, he stared at her naked body. He had imagined what she would look like, but even in his dreams he hadn't conceived how beautiful she really was. Everything about her spoke of perfection, the tips of her tiny toes, the slender length of her legs, her waist and how it curved inward from rounder hips. His eyes lingered on her plump breasts, tipped with nipples that tightened as he watched. His cock hardened further as he rid himself of his tunic, sandals, and loincloth.

"You are a goddess," he murmured, still absorbing the sight of her. His eyes continued to rove as if they couldn't get enough of her beauty. "Flawless, soft, so miraculous."

"You're pretty godlike yourself," she said, placing her hands on his shoulders. Amaru trembled as she touched him. "Strong and solid," she said, squeezing the muscles of his arms and letting her hands graze over his chest and nipples. "But amazingly gentle."

He tried to control his breathing as she continued to caress him. She slid her hands down his sides, over his hips and thighs and back up again. He felt her gaze on his cock and then her hand as she grasped him. His hips jerked in response and he sucked in a breath and clenched his fists as she encircled the shaft with her fingers and stroked up and down. He almost cried when she thumbed the head, sending streaks of pleasure through his body like lightning. Helpless to resist, he thrust into her hand. The sensations were so glorious, he couldn't stop, but when she started to kneel, he grabbed her hand.

"No!" he croaked.

"But I just want to..."

"Please, not yet," he begged. Though his body demanded satisfaction, he forced himself to step

back. He couldn't afford to lose control. Just as her gift was her body, so was his. He would spend all night pleasuring her and the whole of the next day as well, if she allowed it.

"Not yet," he said again. "If you put your mouth on me, I will spend."

The smile she gave him was filled with feminine satisfaction. Her eyes glowed with it as she backed away to climb on the bed. Amaru joined her and pulled her close for a kiss, this time a slow one. He dipped his tongue into her mouth over and over, savoring the taste of her, wanting to engrave it into his memory. Their legs entangled, sliding against each other. He let his hand trace over her hip and up to her breast where he pushed it, squeezed it, then covered it with his mouth.

The moan that Kira gave was long and low. She writhed on the bed as he suckled her, licking and nibbling first one breast, then the other until their tips glistened, swollen and reddened. He loved hearing her pant and imagined how slick she was. Thinking about her honey-glossed passage made his cock throb with need. He ignored it. His need to feast between her legs was greater.

Giving her nipple one last nip, he moved down her body, spreading her thighs until she lay open to his eyes. He leaned forward and took his first taste. A tangy, spiced flavor spread across his tongue. As he slid his hands underneath her, he inhaled to deepen the experience. Such ambrosia did not exist anywhere else but inside a woman's body and he enjoyed nothing more than to coax its flow with soft licks and kisses. He tugged on her hair with his lips, slipping his tongue inside the glistening crevices, teasing and cajoling, coming ever closer to the tiny bud at the apex of her sex. It emerged from its hood like a tiny jewel and he brushed a feather-light kiss upon it in greeting. Kira trembled. He circled it delicately and she moaned his name. Then, with a smile, Amaru sealed his mouth to those plump pink lips and paid proper homage to it. He sucked and licked until his face was slathered with her juices and Kira panted with need. She strained against his mouth in a wordless plea for completion and when he gave it to her, she cried out softly, but clutched his head with more strength than he'd given her credit for. Then, as she settled, he brushed whispering kisses against her, stroking her belly with his hands.

When she let out a contented sigh, he moved up. His cock ached with an exquisite pain, a pain of need that would soon be satisfied. But before he could enter her, before he could ease the pain, he had to verify her feelings. He could not afford a shred of doubt from her. Any resistance would ensure failure.

Swallowing hard, he said, "Kira, is it your wish that we join together as man and woman?"

"Yes, yes." Her voice shook. She looked up at him as he settled his hips between her open legs.

"Do you accept me completely and with free will?"

"Yes, Amaru, I want you inside me." Her eyes seemed to glow golden in the firelight. "I don't think I've ever wanted anything so much in my whole life."

His throat thick with emotion, he angled himself and slowly pushed inside, groaning as he sank into her wet heat. Her eyes fluttered closed and her lips parted. Barely registering that she had wrapped her legs around his waist, he began to move.

All that had been askew shifted into alignment. With each thrust into her, that feeling increased. His life had come full circle. She was the one. He sensed it. His body and soul rejoiced in having found her at last, the key to ending his imprisonment. So complete was his pleasure, that he began to murmur a prayer in Quechua that it never end. But the pressure built. He held out as long as he could, gritting his teeth against the inevitable, until he couldn't hold back any longer. With

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a roar, he ground himself against her, his essence erupting deep inside, the molten liquid flooding her as he shuddered. Kira clung to him, her hands biting into his arms, her legs tight around his hips. As the vestiges of his climax waned, Amaru drew a great breath. His head fell forward and the sweat cooled on his back.

Kira relaxed. She slid her hands over his shoulders up to his face and smiled at him.

"For a four hundred-year-old man," she said, her voice lazy with satisfaction, "you're pretty damn good at that."

Laughing, his soul light with joy and hope, Amaru kissed her.

## *Six*

Kira woke to the sound of birds chirping. Beside her, Amaru snored softly, one arm flung out, the other trapped under her neck. She couldn't remember being happier. The previous night had been glorious. Never had she had a lover as considerate and skilled as Amaru. She'd lost count of how many orgasms he'd given her and marveled at his stamina and creativity. But more than that, a feeling of completion had settled around her. She wondered if perhaps they were indeed fated to be together, that her whole life had led to this man, to this place and this time.

Amaru stirred and opened his eyes. The tenderness she saw there brought an unexpected prickling of tears.

"Kuya, what is wrong?" he asked.

Kira smiled gamely. "Nothing's wrong. I was just wondering how long we have."

"Until dawn," he said, caressing her cheek, "day after tomorrow."

Amaru pulled her closer and she kissed him, suddenly overwhelmed with the need to make love with him again. He seemed to be of the same mind. His cock surged to life, hot and hard against her stomach, and as he loomed over her and sank inside, she shuddered at the incredible pleasure. Every stroke had her gasping in amazement. The expression on his face, as if she was the answer to all his prayers, lifted her to another plane of existence, one where sex had meaning beyond physical satisfaction. And afterward as he cradled her in his arms, Kira rested her cheek against his chest and thought, two days isn't enough, not nearly enough.

\* \* \*

After spending most of their morning in bed, Amaru took her on a tour. The ancient village covered several acres, so even after a couple of hours they didn't see it all. He described so much of Incan everyday life that Kira felt she was getting a college course crammed into one day, and his anecdotes meant so much more today because now she knew that they were true. In the afternoon they visited the llamas. To her delight, he told her she could name the cria. The baby was much friskier today, frolicking about as if on springs, a furry, four-legged bundle of bounce, so she decided to name him Popcorn.

Amaru nodded. "Ah. The Quechua word for that is kamcha. That is a good name for him."

Kira managed to get one hug in before the calf bounded off through the grass, darting toward his mother and then away. Pikka trotted over and greeted Kira by blowing softly in her face.

"That," Amaru said with a smile, "is a llama kiss. Pikka has taken a liking to you."

Giggling, Kira blew a kiss back. "I like her, too. She brought me home safely last night just like you said. In fact, I think I might even be starting to like llama riding."

"That is good, because there is a landmark that you should see. It is a challenging journey because you are still unused to the mountains, but Pikka can navigate it easily."

"If you say I have to see it, I have to see it."

"It is too late to go now. We will go tomorrow."

"Oh, well, in that case I wouldn't mind another trip to the hot springs," she said with a

suggestive smile. "You know, for a nice...bath."

Amaru's eyes darkened and the corner of his mouth tilted upward. "I think I would very much enjoy a bath with you."

A rush of heat filled Kira at the promise in his eyes.

\* \* \*

They decided to postpone the bath until after the evening meal which Amaru cooked over an open flame. As evening fell and the stars came out, they fed each other with their fingers, and anticipation turned every bite into a sensual adventure. They exchanged smoldering looks and deliberate innuendo, and when they finally shed their clothes and slipped into the hot water, Kira was so aroused, she thought she might come at the first touch.

They bathed each other with a fragrant soap that Amaru had brought, and Kira reveled in the feeling of his hands on her body, sliding over every sensitive inch of skin, and she reciprocated, teasing him just as much as he'd teased her. After they rinsed off, this time he allowed her to take him inside her mouth and she drove him to the edge before he pulled away, breathing hard.

They came together fiercely beside the steaming pool, Kira straddling his hips. She had never made love under the stars before, and at this high altitude, it seemed as if she could see every single one, perhaps even touch some of them. She felt so small in comparison, and yet joined like this with Amaru, she also felt strong and supremely significant, if only in his eyes. As they climaxed within seconds of each other, she cried out her passion for him to the vast sky, as if declaring that, together, they were a force to be reckoned with.

## *Seven*

"Okay, one more time," Kira said.

"Inti..." Amaru enunciated carefully and slowly.

"Inti..." Kira repeated.

"...hua..."

"...hua..."

"...tana..."

"...tana..."

Amaru smiled. "Intihuatana."

"Inti-hua-mama-choochoo-chacha." Kira dissolved into laughter. "I can't say it!"

Amaru's eyes creased as his own deep laughter boomed from his chest. "Yes, you can. You only need to practice."

The two of them rested atop a stone pyramid on their third and last day together. Pikka had indeed carried Kira most of the way, but Kira didn't feel skilled enough to stay on the llama's back as it climbed the steep terraced steps to the top. Needless to say, after climbing the equivalent of a six-story building, she was out of breath. However once again, the spectacular view justified the effort. All around the ruins, the stone-paved roads and verdant mountain slopes offered themselves like a visual concerto. She didn't need to use her eyes to see how protected this area was from modern man; she could feel it in her bones. She and Amaru existed in a different dimension, blessedly sequestered from the outside world.

But not for much longer.

Pushing that thought aside, she touched the granite obelisk, the Intihuatana, that Amaru had brought her to see. It only stood about four feet high, but was about as thick around as an armchair.

"Can't I just call it the big rock?" she asked.

Amaru chuckled. "It is not just a big rock. This is a sacred place. At noon on the two days of the year when day and night are exactly equal, the priests of the temple would perform a ceremony 'tying' Inti to this stone so he did not swing too far one way or the other toward light and darkness. It is also said that some people, when they touch their foreheads to the stone, will see into the spirit world."

Kira raised an eyebrow. "So it's a sort of Incan Blarney Stone. Have you ever seen anything?"

"No," he said with a laugh. "My mother used to say that my skull was too thick."

Smiling, Kira got on her knees and faced the stone. "Maybe mine's not."

Amaru watched as she placed her palms on the face of the rock, leaned forward, and pressed her forehead against it. She remained still for a long moment, then straightened.

"What happened?" he asked. Since she faced the stone, he couldn't see her expression.

She shrugged. "Nothing. I guess my head's too hard, too." But she rubbed her forehead thoughtfully.

On the ride back from the Intihuatana, Kira said little. She seemed focused inward. Amaru guessed that her strange mood emanated from the fact that, come morning, they would part. He, too, felt sorrow, more bitterly than ever before. He wanted more than these three days with her.

He wanted a lifetime.

He had not seen nearly enough of her beautiful smiles, nor heard enough of her happy laughter. There was so much he did not know about her. He yearned to discover all the facets and layers of her, her past, her dreams, her fears. But time was running out. They had only a few more hours together before he had to face the ordeal at the bridge. Tonight would be the last time he would hold her in his arms.

Amaru almost bellowed in frustration, but screaming at Inti about the injustice would do no good and would probably upset Kira. Most likely this had been the god's plan all along, to allow Amaru to taste love, and then to snatch it away. Was that what he had done to Inti when he'd taken Nima? Did the gods feel love for humans?

Amaru's head ached with all his thoughts. It ached almost as much as his heart. When they arrived back at the village, he glanced at Kira as she slid off Pikka's back. She hugged the animal around the neck, and Pikka turned her head and snuffled, her ears forward.

Kira's smile returned, brightening her eyes with the light of a thousand suns. "Did you see that?" she asked. "She likes me! She really likes me!" Then she collapsed with laughter at a joke he didn't understand. Amaru smiled, too, but his chest constricted painfully.

How could he face eternity without her?

\* \* \*

That night he presented her with a gift, a token with which to remember him. He hoped that she would want to remember her time with him, but wondered if Inti even allowed the women their memories when he returned them to their world. There was no way of knowing.

When Kira saw the golden amulet shaped like a llama, her eyes filled with tears.

Amaru winced. "My gift was intended to lighten your heart, not make you cry. You have been so quiet all afternoon."

Kira sniffed and tried to smile as he tied the leather thong around her neck. "I'm sorry I'm crying. I really do love this. Did you make it?"

"Yes. As you can imagine, I have a great deal of time to myself. But I chose this one especially for you because you love the llamas so much." He turned her around and kissed her. "I want you to know I meant what I said at the pasture two days ago. I wish you every happiness. Love, a family, health and long life."

More tears spilled. She tried to speak, but couldn't seem to get any words out, so Amaru enfolded her in his arms. Not really trusting his own voice anymore, he decided to show her what he felt with action instead. By the time the night was over she would know that he loved her. He would communicate the depth of his feelings with every kiss, every caress, every embrace. He would fill these last precious hours with nothing but love for her so that when dawn arrived hopefully he would have enough memories to live on.

## *Eight*

Kira woke up with a start. Something was wrong. Without opening her eyes she sensed that Amaru was gone.

Panic flooded her. She scrambled out of bed and threw on clothes and shoes. She hadn't expected or wanted to sleep at all. The choice she had to make should have made it impossible, but somehow she'd dozed off. For how long, she had no idea. All she knew now was that she had to find the bridge before it was too late.

Frantic, she burst out of the cottage. The moon cast just enough light for her to see the path. She wasn't at all sure she remembered the way, but didn't have time to think about it. She just ran, hoping instinct would guide her.

Her heart pounding, she rounded a bend in the trail and saw the black outline of the bridge against the lightening sky. Amaru, in a thin white robe, stood in the center of the span, his hands resting on the rope, his head bowed.

"Amaru! Stop! Wait!"

His head jerked up. Kira pushed herself to run the rest of the way, though it felt as if her lungs had shrunk to half their size. When she reached him, her legs went out and she almost fell, but he caught her.

"Kira, why are you here? You should be back at the village sleeping," he said, holding her tightly.

Kira clung to him, gasping. Relief at having caught him in time helped quell her panic, but not completely. Fear of the terrifying task that lay ahead almost paralyzed her.

"Thank God...caught you...in time," she panted.

Amaru tightened his embrace. "Kuya, you must go back. You can do nothing and watching me will only cause you pain."

She shook her head violently. "You're wrong. It's all...up to me. I know what...has to be done to...set you free."

He drew back, his handsome face a mask of confusion.

"We have to jump...together."

He stared at her, aghast. "What?"

"It's true. At the big rock...I lied. I did see something. In order for you to be free, I have to..."

"No," he said, stumbling backwards as if distancing himself from her could change what she had said. "No! I will not allow it." He raised his face to the sky. "She did nothing wrong! You cannot punish her for my crime!" he screamed. Tendons stood out in his neck in sharp relief.

Kira took his face in her hands, trying to soothe him. "You don't have a choice. I was meant to do this for you." Tears spilled from her eyes. "Because why else would I fall in love with you?"

Suddenly, he went still. "You love me?" She wiped her eyes and nodded. "Yes, I love you, Amaru. I love you as big as the sky..."

"...and as high as the clouds," he finished. He crushed her to his chest again and kissed her hard. "It is the same with me, kuya. But I cannot let you do this."

"I already told you. You don't have a choice. I either jump with you or after you," she declared, her heart thumping like a giant mallet in her chest.



Amaru stared into her eyes, apparently gauging her earnestness, but she knew he would see nothing but determination. Yes, she had been indecisive before. She'd kept the vision a secret because she hadn't wanted to understand what she'd seen. She had told herself it was the altitude. Too much sun. That knock on the head when she fell on the bridge. But she knew that wasn't true. If what she'd seen was to be believed, she had the power to save this man, to deliver him from four hundred years of solitude and repentance.

And although she was almost incoherent with fear, she did believe that. More importantly, she believed in their love. She had faith that what they felt for each other would break the curse. Love was the answer. Love was the key.

On the horizon, a pale ribbon of pink appeared. More and more birds began to break out in song. The new day had arrived. It was time.

As Amaru swallowed hard and nodded once to show his acceptance, Kira let out the breath she didn't know she'd been holding.

"Do as I do," he said. "We must offer our ritual kisses to the sun."

He faced east again, and Kira followed his lead. "I know. I saw this in my vision."

In unison, they kissed their fingertips and then lifted and opened their hands as if releasing a bird. Far below them, water rushed over the rocks and the bridge swayed slightly as they climbed over the rope to stand on the outside of the railing. Kira held on to the bridge with one hand and turned to Amaru, who did the same. He wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her close.

"*Kuyana kuyki*," he said gruffly. "I love you."

Kira gazed into his dark eyes and whispered, "I love you, too."

Then, after a gentle kiss, they joined hands and leapt into the abyss.

## *Nine*

For the second time that day Kira woke up with a start. All she could see around her was a white fog. It rolled and swirled around her like she was floating in a cloud, and yet she felt a firm surface of a grassy meadow under her back. Sitting up, she heard a bird chirp somewhere and hope flickered inside her.

"Amaru?" she called softly. She waved her arms around to dispel the fog.

"Kira, I am here," came the answer.

She turned toward the sound of his voice. Miraculously, the mist gave way to reveal his tall, proud figure standing in the llama pasture. He was dressed, not in his tunic and sandals, but in modern khakis, a white shirt, and a pair of hiking boots. A jaunty straw Panama hat perched on his head, and a smile as wide as the equator spread across his handsome face.

"Amaru!" Kira jumped to her feet and ran to him. He caught her in his arms and fastened his mouth to hers in a fierce kiss.

"You're alive!" she cried, jubilant.

"I am alive," he said, still smiling. "I woke up on the other side of the bridge, which means I am no longer a prisoner on this side."

She hugged him again, unbelievably happy. She covered his face with kisses until Pikka came over, curious as to what the fuss was about. Kira laughed and hugged her, too, but Amaru shooed the llama away.

"I think because of our garments," he said, "Inti intends for me to live in your world now."

"Damn straight," Kira said, noticing now that she too wore modern clothing. "You're coming with me whether you like it or not."

Her mind whirled with the implications. She'd have to explain him to her friends and family. And how much of the truth would she reveal? How would she get him home to California without proper identification?

Amaru kissed her on the forehead. "Do not frown. This is a time of joy."

She smiled. "You're right. And I am joyful. I'm overflowing with it."

"Then, come with me, kuya. I have something to show you that I hope you will like."

Taking her hand, he led her to a stone house at the edge of the village. He opened the door and gestured her inside. Kira gasped at the sight of shelves upon shelves of handcrafted artifacts: beautiful pottery; axes, knives and other weapons; masks; carved gourds; jewelry, like the pendant he'd given her; painted clay figures; several walking sticks with finials of wrought silver and gold. Kira ran a hand over one of the stacks of brightly patterned fabric.

"You made all of this?" she asked in wonder.

He nodded. "The loom is in another building. The forge is on the north side of the village. As I said, I had nothing but time on my hands."

Slowly she walked the perimeter of the room, shaking her head in awe.

"Amaru, do you have any idea how much this is worth? The gold alone...wait a second." She turned to him slowly. "Do you happen to know which of these goods are older than others?"

"Generally, I stored my work in one house until it was filled. Then I moved to another house."

"How many houses?"

"Six."

Kira shook her head in amazement. "Then, you have probably just become one of the richest men in Peru. Museums will pay through the nose for this stuff. I can't believe this. I can't believe it."

"Believe it and believe this," Amaru said, clasping her face in his big hands. "For so long I thought I was the most cursed man who ever lived, but I was wrong. The worst despair I ever felt is nothing compared to my joy at finding you."

Kira couldn't stop tears from flooding her eyes. "I feel the same way. I want to say that phrase you taught me, but I can't remember how it goes."

"Hatun hawa, altu aypu," he said, his eyes filled with love.

"Hatoo nawa, alta nap you," she said, with snuffle-giggle. "God, I'm so hopeless. I'll never learn how to speak Quechua."

"Yes, you will. You just need some time," he said and kissed her forehead.

Kira looked up at him, her heart bursting with happiness. "Time and you," she said, "That's all I need."

### *About the Author*

**Kate Willoughby** got hooked on romance in the late seventies when she read *Sweet Savage Love* by Rosemary Rogers. Inspired, she and her best friend wrote a contemporary love story involving a multi-millionaire and the restaurant hostess determined to cure his drinking problem. Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on how you look at it), that manuscript has been lost forever.

Fast forward to college, where she took a creative writing course. Kate still wanted to write love stories, but everyone else in the class was composing *Important Literature and Thought-Provoking Poetry*. A few devastating critiques later, she gave up, discouraged and embarrassed. Eventually, her muse got over the trauma and pestered her to try her hand at writing again. She now has three e-books published. Kate resides in Los Angeles with her husband and two sons. When the testosterone in the house builds up to unbearable levels, she escapes by reading, cooking, and scrapbooking with friends. She's a diehard Internet junkie, so readers can find her there via her website, email, or her blog.

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