



BOOK TWO OF THE KISS ME SERIES

Kiss Me, Lynn

LINDA GEORGE



**KISS ME,
LYNN
By Linda
George**

**Book 2 of the
Kiss Me Series**

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(sequel to ***Gabriel's
Heart***)

Silver Lady

Author's Note

The tour depicted in this book is based on an actual tour my husband and I were privileged to take during the summer of 2013. Some readers may call this book a “travelogue,” and they’d be right. Hopefully, after reading this book, you’ll feel you’ve been to Peru. I’ll be posting photographs from our tour on my website to accompany the tour in the book to let readers see what Lynn and Alex are seeing.

Our guide, Alex Vereau, allowed me to use his name in the book as a tribute to his excellent contribution to

our visit to Cusco, the Sacred Valley of the Inca, and Machu Picchu. His knowledge of Peru is extraordinary. He also gave me permission to use the photograph I took of him at Machu Picchu on the cover. Thanks, Alex!

Alex shared stories with us about his experiences as a guide. I got the idea for this book from several of those stories, which I have combined, then embellished to create my own story. I've also added several of my friends—Barb, BJ, Sheila, Cathi, Dorothy, and Vicki, as the *turistas* who accompany Lynn and Sharon on their tour.

Everything about Alex Vereau,

other than the use of his name and his photograph on the cover of the book, has been fictionalized, but little bits of our tour and his charming personality crept into the story and would not be denied!

I took the cover photo of Alex, and the one of Machu Picchu from the Watch Tower, where I outlined this book in the notebook I took everywhere we went, and which was used extensively to write this story.

For your own tour of Peru, contact Alex Vereau through his Facebook Page. Mention my name and that you read about him in **Kiss Me, Lynn!**

The cover was designed by Carrie Peters Spencer, of www.cheekycovers.com. Carrie does all the covers for my e-books and she has my praise and thanks!

This book is dedicated to
Alex Vereau

For his exceptional
knowledge of Cusco, the
Sacred Valley of the Inca, and
Machu Picchu

His expertise in guiding us
through the country he loves
so dearly made our visit to

Peru one we'll treasure for the
rest of our lives.

Thanks, Alex, for
allowing me to use your name,
and your photograph on the
cover, and for telling me
stories that inspired this book.

Chapter 1

“Peru! Are you insane?”

Lynn Hanson, loaded down with books and lecture notes, hurried down the hall toward her room at Thomas Jefferson High School in Keswick, Virginia. Her best friend, Sharon Bennett, followed. Students rushed to their lockers, talking frantically in loud voices, twirling locks, dropping books inside with a thud then slamming the metal doors, creating the typical din of a large high school on a Friday afternoon. Pep Rally time!

Sharon leaned closer so she'd be heard. “But, Lynn, think what fun it will

be to take two weeks off this summer. No classes, no in-service meetings, no writing lesson plans for next year the way you always do. No teacher should ever have a year's lesson plans written before school starts. It's inhuman! We both need a complete break from school. An actual vacation will be good for both of us."

Four students—two girls in cheerleader outfits and two boys dressed in football jerseys—pushed past Lynn with apologies, hurrying to the gym. She could already hear the band warming up.

"Good for you, maybe. I need to write an article this summer about how I'm going to teach World History this next year. That magazine I've been

courting for the past two years is finally interested now that I'm actually going to teach what I've been telling them about. I've wanted to teach history backwards for years. Mr. Conners has finally said yes! That means a whole new set of lesson plans. The editor wants to follow my progress all year before publishing the article. I have to have the plans perfect! He may want to publish some of them with the article.”

As they neared the gym, the band went into the fight song, eliciting shouts, whistles, and cheers from students filing into their customary places according to class. Eight cheerleaders on the gym floor chanted along with the song. The noise was deafening.

Sharon yelled, “So reverse the ones you already have! With that wacky lesson planning system of yours, all you’ll have to do is renumber the boxes, then copy it from back to front and you’ll have it done! It won’t take two days!”

They stopped at the gym doors. Sharon grabbed Lynn’s arm and dragged her back into the hall, toward the area where students generally gathered between classes and after lunch. With the rally going on, it was almost empty. They could still hear everything, but it wasn’t nearly as loud. Lynn was secretly glad they hadn’t gone into the gym. Her head pounded in time with the band’s enthusiastic drummers.

“It isn’t that you don’t have the

money for this vacation,” Sharon continued. “You have enough money squirreled away to last the rest of your workaholic, no-fun-at-all life! It’s time to spend some of that money on a grand adventure that could change your life forever! Imagine the unit on the Incas you could include this year! There’s nothing like personal experience to make history come alive. Admit it!”

Lynn sighed. She couldn’t argue with that. “I agree.” Three students lagging behind the others slogged between her and Sharon. Lynn grabbed one of them by the shoulders and steered him around, reminding him to be courteous. Then she turned back to Sharon with a sigh. “I like my summers

the way I've always spent them, thanks very much."

"You teach all year, then you write lesson plans all summer that are essentially the same ones you wrote the summer before—"

"I love planning. And they aren't always the same. This new system of teaching history backwards will be completely different. On the first day of class, we'll look at several newspapers to find out what's happening that will someday be part of history. It's exciting! It will take me all summer to refine the transitions."

Doors to the gym were closed after the football team entered to a roar and took their places under the huge

painting of a wildcat—the school mascot—done in red and white—the school colors. The doors muted the sounds just enough for Sharon to continue her onslaught.

“Right. How silly of me. Exciting. I enjoy planning, too, but not until a couple of weeks before school starts. I love movies and dating, too. Who are you dating right now? Don’t tell me! Let me guess! No one. You were in love once, remember? I know it’s been a long time. Whose fault is that? Who do you love now?”

Lynn led the way to the library, across the commons area, and went inside. Sharon closed the door behind them. Quiet. It was almost quiet, except

for the headache, which reverberated in her head like the drums in the band.

“My students. I love my students.”

“Not the same.”

“I’m okay with being between relationships.”

“For two years?”

“So, who’s counting?”

“I am.”

“How would two weeks in Peru change anything?”

“We won’t know until we go and see what happens. You might have a fling with a handsome Peruvian while we’re there.”

“No flings. Flings tend to break your heart and when you try to glue the pieces back together with tears, there are

always pieces missing. I've been there, remember?"

"How could I forget? He was an idiot. You can do better." Sharon took a deep breath. "Okay, no flings. For you. Maybe for me. You'll meet the love of your life and bring him home with you or stay in Peru with him. Or both! Nothing says you can't split your time between work and being loved out of your mind every day for the rest of your life!"

"More complications are the last thing I need. Right now, you're the one complicating my life. Don't we need to be at the pep rally?"

"It can wait. How old are you?"

"You know very well how old I am."

“Old enough to be married with a couple of kids.”

“You’re the same age I am. I don’t see you wearing a ring, carpooling kids to piano lessons and soccer practice and sponsoring band trips.”

“I haven’t met the right Peruvian yet. But I will! And so will you! Then, we can carpool for each other—in Cusco!”

Lynn closed her eyes and rubbed her temples. Sharon would never give up. She might as well cut to the bottom line.

“When is this grand adventure?”

“That’s what I wanted to hear! Just shy of two months from the end of school. A friend of mine, Barb Webber

—you’ve met her—has been booked for four months for a tour of Cusco, the Sacred Valley of the Inca and Machu Picchu. A couple who signed up to go had to drop out. They have to fill those two positions, or pay more. So, not only would we have the time of our lives, we’d be helping Barb’s whole group. It isn’t a huge group. Only eight, counting us.”

“I’m not hiking the Inca Trail for four grueling days on paths scarcely three feet wide with no rails.”

Sharon’s eyes widened. “You know about the Inca Trail?”

“Bill hiked that trail years ago with a group from his firm. Couldn’t stop talking about how grueling it was

and how he'd never have gone if his boss hadn't required everyone in the department to participate in some sort of teamwork thing. Their guide had hiked the trail dozens of times! I couldn't imagine doing it even once after seeing the photos they took. Breathtaking vistas, but I'd never see them. My eyes would be stuck to my feet to make sure I didn't tumble down the mountain. Have you noticed how steep the Andes are?"

"No Inca Trail. I promise."

"My conditions."

"I'm all ears."

"I don't want a breakneck pace.

No hopping from one cathedral to another with museums in between, linked together to the point I can't

remember what I saw where. Plenty of time for relaxing in plazas, taking photos, and shopping in the markets. There are markets, right?”

Sharon nodded. “Food and craft markets, from what I’ve read.”

“Is this a group of senior citizens?”

“Not that senior. Young enough to do whatever’s on the itinerary, but not so young it’ll seem like we’re on a field trip. All able to do moderate hiking.”

Lynn had to admit she was feeling more excited about this excursion by the minute. “When would we leave?”

“Six weeks from the day school is out. Fourteen days of touring plus two days of travel. And, if you want to skip

anything on the itinerary, you'll be free to do so."

Hmmm. Two weeks of easy touring, relaxing, shopping, and trying local fruits and vegetables from the markets was sounding like a dream vacation—with or without handsome Peruvians vying to be the love of her life.

"What about vaccinations? Are we going to have to shell out \$500 to be protected from yellow fever and encephalitis?"

"Not necessary since we won't be going to Lake Titicaca or into the jungle."

"Okay, I'm in. We'll have to get our flights immediately."

“Actually, I’ve already had them change the names on the existing flights from the drop-outs to us. I put everything on my card. You can pay me back as soon as I have a bottom line. We’ll be taking plenty of cash to convert to *soles*, the local money. Exchange rate right now is about three to one.”

“You knew I’d give in.”

“Of course! I had two more plans of attack, but a spectacular unit on the Inca seemed like the one to go with first.” Sharon gave Lynn a quick hug and hurried down the hall toward the gym.

“Margaritas! Six-thirty! You know where! Now, I’d better get to the rally. Not you. Headache. You need to rest.”

Sharon’s exuberance was one of

her most endearing qualities, and the primary reason they'd been friends since fifth grade.

Lynn would have to have some new clothes for the trip. No problem there. But forget about having a fling in Peru. Sharon was welcome to ruin her life by getting involved with their guide if she wanted to.

She sighed. A complete break from teaching might be exactly what she needed before beginning this new course outline. Leave it to Sharon to drag them off to a different country. A different continent. A different hemisphere!

Cusco, Peru

Alex Vereau's cell phone rang

while he was counting to make sure everyone was back on the bus after lunch. It was Malena.

“Alex, I have a new tour for you. Three weeks from Tuesday. One couple had to drop out, but replacements have been found. Eight total. Ages range from 30s to 50s. Be sure to note the new names—Lynn and Sharon.” Malena always got excited about new tours, and Alex was always happy to be assigned a new group of *turistas*. He loved his country and he loved passing along that love to people visiting Peru for the first time. “Inca Trail?”

“Not this time. Caral, Larco, Cusco, Sacred Valley, Machu Picchu, and a fairly easy pace. Fourteen days!

They want time built into the itinerary to relax in the plazas, shop, take photos, have afternoons on their own two or three times—with you close by to translate and answer questions, of course.”

Alex smiled. A couple of weeks of easy touring would be perfect after the back to back hikes he'd recently completed on the Inca Trail, followed by a week with a group of high school students from Texas, eager to practice their Spanish, on tour with their Spanish Honor Society. After he finished this group from California, he'd have two days off before the next tour, then another four days on the Inca Trail. Three more days off, then this new

group. After that...

“Wait a minute. You said Caral and Larco. Aren’t you going to use a guide from Lima for those tours?”

“You were requested! Didn’t I tell you? They want you to be their guide the whole time they’re in Peru. A woman in the group has a friend from Texas who recommended you after her tour last summer.”

“Who?”

“The writer. I can’t remember her name. Linda, I think. Remember, she took notes in that notebook everywhere you went. She left it on the bus one evening. She thought she’d left it at lunch, watching the horses dance. But it was there. She was so happy she hadn’t

lost it.”

Alex smiled again. He knew exactly who that writer was. He’d have to thank her! They’d stayed in touch on Facebook and she joked with him, asking him to have Pisco Sours for her, since she couldn’t get Pisco in Texas. Her favorite was strawberry.

“Where is this group from?”

“Virginia. Linda’s friend is Barbara. Barbara’s friend, Sharon, talked her friend, Lynn, into joining her to take the places of the couple who couldn’t come—the Averys.”

“I’ll make sure that group has an especially good time. Be sure to include a Pisco-tasting in Cusco. Linda and her husband, Chuck, really enjoyed making

their own Pisco Sours.”

“Already done. Barbara requested it after Linda recommended it to her. The final itinerary for this next group is ready. I’ve e-mailed it to you. You’ll have all the tickets soon. I’ll get everything for the Virginia group to you as soon as I can, along with your flight to Lima. You’ll be flying with them to Cusco after Caral and Larco.”

“Thanks, Malena.” Now, back to his current group of *turistas*. Not one of them had tried *ceviche* since they’d arrived in Cusco. Maybe he could coax them to try it at lunch. It had been weeks since anyone had truly loved this Peruvian dish as much as he loved it, and much longer since he’d shared it

with someone he loved.

His job as a tour guide meant being away from his home in Cusco too much to spend quality time with a *novia*. But he loved sharing his knowledge of Peru too much to have a job that would allow him to be home at the same time every night, like someone who worked in an office. How could he cut back on his commitment to the *turistas* who helped his country's economy so much?

Sometimes, he felt he was cursed when it came to love. Twice, he'd been close to marriage, but both times the relationship had ended, simply because of the time he spent traveling with tour groups. He'd remained good friends with both women and helped both of

them find the men they were destined to spend their lives with. He still had hope that someday the true love of his life would appear and love him for who he was and what he loved to do. A woman who would love Peru as much as he loved it. He only hoped, when she appeared, he'd recognize her!

Chapter 2

Lynn purposely waited until a few days before they were going to leave to call her mother. She didn't want to make a trip to Santa Fe before going to Peru, and waiting was the best way to make sure that wouldn't work. Her mother answered on the fourth ring.

"Mom? I was about to give up. I thought you weren't home." She kicked off her shoes and stretched to loosen tight muscles in her legs.

"I'm home. I just wasn't close to the phone. How are you?"

"Good. Actually, excited about a

trip I'm going to take with Sharon in a few days. To Peru."

"Peru!"

"I'll be part of a tour group. Two people canceled so Sharon and I took their places."

"How long will you be gone?"

"Sixteen days. We'll fly into Lima for two days of touring, then fly to Cusco for several more days. Then, we'll tour the Sacred Valley before riding a train to Machu Picchu. I've always wanted to go there."

"You started talking about it when you were about eight. That's wonderful."

Her mother's words were enthusiastic, but the tone in her voice

was completely different.

“Are you okay, Mom? You sound tired. A summer cold, maybe?”

“No, dear, I’m not sick. But I am a little tired. I’m sorry if I don’t sound happy for you. I am! Truly! You’ll have to take lots of photos and show them to me when you get back.”

Show them to me. Not show them to us.

“Is Dad around? He’s the one who got me interested in ancient civilizations. I’d like to hear his reaction.”

A pause. “No, he isn’t here. He’s . . . well, there’s no easy way to say this. He left me.”

Lynn felt a jolt of fear. “You can’t be serious!”

“I’m afraid I am. I got up this morning and he was gone.”

Alarm bells went off in Lynn’s brain. Her father would never simply leave.

“Did he explain?”

“No. Just left. But that’s all right. He never loved me.”

Now Lynn knew something wasn’t right. “Dad has always loved you.”

“I thought so, too, but he was very good at hiding his real feelings. I’m not sorry he’s gone.”

“Mom! How can you say that? You’ve been married to Dad for forty years!”

“It would’ve been forty next March. It’s difficult to explain. We’ve

grown apart over the years. Now that I think about it, I knew he was going to leave. In fact, I asked him to leave. Yesterday. Yes, that's what happened."

Lynn was stunned into silence.

After high school, she'd applied only to colleges that were far enough from California that she wouldn't be getting surprise visits every weekend from her mother, and so she wouldn't be tempted to run home whenever things weren't going right. All those years growing up under her mother's thumb had convinced her that separation was the only way she'd ever become her own person. And she had! Now, though, instead of flying to Peru, she needed to be with her mother, to help get this confusing

nightmare straightened out.

“Mom—“

“You’re going to Peru. When you get home, you can come for a visit, bring all the photos, and see that I’m okay. Really. If you don’t believe me, call your father. I think his cell number is the same. He still hasn’t gotten his things out of the house. I’m going to go through the house today, shelf by shelf and closet by closet, deciding what will stay and what he’ll take to his new home. I’m not about to let him take anything that has meaning to me. I’m okay. Truly.”

“You’re anything but okay. I’ll tell Sharon I can’t go. Surely, there’s someone else—“

“No! You need to go. Don’t worry

about me! I'm a grown woman and perfectly capable of taking care of myself, no matter what your father says! Classes will begin in a few weeks for the fall semester. They've given me the class I've always wanted to teach—Pre-Columbian Civilizations. What you see and learn on your trip will be helpful, so take plenty of detailed notes about everything you see and do. I'll share your photos with my classes.”

Her talking about teaching again made no sense. Lynn knew, though, that there was no use bringing it up.

Lynn's mother had taught history for the small college where they'd lived in northern California for more than twenty years. She and her father had

been Lynn's inspiration to become a teacher of World History. But she'd retired from teaching three years ago, right before they'd moved to Santa Fe.

"All right. I'll go. Then, I'm flying to Santa Fe for at least a week!"

"Perfect. I've heard it's nice there. Then you can come to see us in California. You remember where we live, don't you? By then, I'll have the house back in order, and myself back in order, too. You'll see that this is for the best. Give Sharon a big hug for me. Bring her with you when you come. This is a big house. Plenty of room for guests. I converted your room into an office, but we have two sofas in the den. Or the living room. I forget."

References to their California house made no sense, either. She had to call Dad.

“Mom, I love you. Dad, too.”

“No reason for that to change just because he means nothing to me. Send me your itinerary so I’ll know where you are every day and what you’re seeing. I’ll call you every day to make sure you’re all right.”

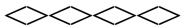
“My cell phone probably won’t work in Peru. But you can e-mail me.”

“Fine. If you don’t want to talk to me, then I don’t want to talk to you either.” She hung up.

Stunned, Lynn sat for a moment, trying to sort out what she’d just heard. How could she enjoy a vacation

knowing that her parents were living in separate homes? Her mother sounded like a different person—cold and unemotional. She dialed her father’s cell phone but got only voice mail. “Dad, call me as soon as possible. I just talked to Mom. She told me you’ve left her—or that she asked you to leave. She wasn’t clear on that point. Then she hung up on me. Please call.”

Next, Lynn called Sharon, who couldn’t believe it either. She promised to make the trip to Santa Fe with Lynn after they got home from Peru. Now if Dad would just call and tell her what was going on!



That evening her phone rang.

“Dad! Thank goodness! Where are you?”

“I’m at home. Everything’s okay.

Well, not everything. Your mother got confused this morning when she woke up late and I’d already gone to work. I guess she dreamed that she’d asked me to leave.”

“Thank goodness! She scared me to death! So she’s okay again?”

He didn’t answer for what felt like a long time.

“I haven’t told you because I honestly hoped it was something simple, like an allergy. About three months ago, your mother had some difficulty remembering simple things, like how to make cornbread. She searched every book on the shelves—even the history

books—looking for the recipe.”

“But she’s never had the recipe written down. It came from Grandma.”

“I know. When I got home from work that day, every book from every shelf was on the floor, thrown into piles, and your mother was sitting at the kitchen table, staring into space. When she finally told me what was wrong, I knew she needed to see the doctor. He did a dozen tests before deciding...”

“Alzheimer’s?”

“Possibly. Of course, it wasn’t a definitive diagnosis, but everything points to it. He’ll be doing more tests on cognitive abilities, looking for more specific markers that will tell us if that’s it, or if it’s something else.

Lynn covered her eyes with one hand and took several deep breaths. It all made sense now.

“So when she said you’d left her
—”

“She dreamed it, then thought it was true, or somehow her sense of reality was altered. If it’s a type of Dementia, then she’s beginning to lose parts of her memory. Sam’s mother had Dementia. He said it was like her memory was combed every day, removing little bits here and there while leaving other bits intact. The times when your mother’s been confused have been spaced pretty far apart. Most of the time she seems completely normal. But bits of her memory are definitely gone.”

“I’m so sorry, Dad. If I were closer—”

“You have your own life! If it’s Dementia, it’s going to go on a long time. You’ll have plenty of time to visit. I’ve been thinking about retiring soon. I’ll just retire a little sooner.”

“Did Mom tell you I’m going to Peru?”

“Yes! What an incredible time you’ll have! Hang on a minute. Your mother wants to talk to you.”

Lynn took a deep breath, not knowing what to expect.

“Lynn! Take lots of photos! We’ll want to see every last one when you get back!”

“I will, Mom. How’s the weather

in Santa Fe?”

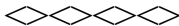
“Hot as usual. We need rain.

What? Dad says we need to go. I have an appointment with our doctor in an hour.

What? I had the appointment this afternoon? Lynn, I had the appointment this afternoon. Don't worry! I'm sure it's nothing. What? Oh. It was just confusion after a vivid dream. Love you!”

“I love you, too.”

Lynn felt like she'd been punched in the gut. How long would it be before her mother could no longer stay home alone? Thank goodness Dad was there to handle everything.



The next two days went by in a blur. The itinerary—which she scanned

and e-mailed to her parents—including lists of the clothes to take and essentials such as sunscreen and insect repellent, comfortable shoes and socks for extensive walking. The more detail her mother had, the more likely she was to remember that Lynn was in Peru. She hoped. She also bought a blank book so she could record everything they saw and her feelings about being there.

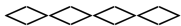
She and Sharon had decided to pack together so they wouldn't duplicate items and so they'd both have room in their suitcases to bring back whatever they bought. Lynn had no idea what Sharon intended to buy, but knowing her, they'd be fun and would trigger memories of the trip for the rest of their

lives.

Lynn talked to her mother once more and heard nothing unusual. She wished she could accept her mom's situation as well as her dad seemed to be doing.

Finally, the day before they were to leave arrived. They'd packed and repacked a dozen times until Sharon declared everything "perfect."

Lynn got an e-mail that evening from Bill. From Bill! After two years of silence! She couldn't believe what she read. She closed her laptop without answering. What nerve!



Cusco

Alex, exhausted after the last three

tours, had three days off so he'd be rested for the group from Virginia. Malena hadn't been kidding when she said the itinerary was an easy one. He usually rushed the *turistas* from place to place, trying to cram in as much as possible in the days allotted for their tour. But this group wanted a fairly easy pace, and that suited him perfectly. Also, it was a small group, which made it easier for him to keep up with everyone. Large groups usually wandered off by themselves and were late getting back on the bus, which put them late almost everywhere they went. The Virginia group, he had a feeling, would enjoy the places they visited, more than if they saw twice as many.

The night before flying to Lima, Alex met several of his friends at one of their favorite pubs. Tonight, there wouldn't be live music, so he took his guitar.

“Alex! *Amigo!* Play for us!” they shouted when he came in carrying his guitar case.

“In a minute! First, I want a Pisco Sour!” He pulled a chair up to the table and signaled the waitress. She hugged him briefly. He and Marta had been friends since grade school. She was married to one of Alex's friends, Herman, and they had two *niños*, José and Paloma, who called him Tío Alex. Sometimes, Alex stayed with them while their parents had an evening out together.

Those times were a sharp reminder that he didn't have children of his own, and maybe never would. At least he could be Tio Alex to Herman and Marta's children.

About half an hour later, he pulled out his guitar, strummed to check the tuning, then asked for requests. Playing always brought back sweet memories—and bitter ones, too. His *novias* had loved hearing him play. And the songs his friends and the others in the pub requested were also favorites from the past. Whenever the memories began to overwhelm him, he smiled wider and sang louder. Someday, he hoped to play for a new *novia*. But with each year that passed, his hopes faded a little more.

Virginia

Getting on the plane in Charlottesville elicited excitement Lynn didn't expect to feel. The terminal buzzed with hundreds of voices, announcements of flights, and warnings not to leave baggage unattended. Sharon chattered over the chaos, then pointed toward a McDonald's. "Drinks! We need cold carbonation."

They ordered, then found their gate. By the time they reached the boarding area, their drinks had been finished and the cups dropped into a trash bin. Lynn wished for a refill to take onto the plane. She couldn't wait to get seated and try to calm herself.

Excitement mixed with anxiety made her want to drop everything and bolt toward the exit.

A few deep breaths and letting herself focus on the chatter among their group helped. Lynn settled into the semi-comfortable seat with her Kindle in her lap, but didn't feel like reading quite yet. She surveyed the group. She knew they'd be wonderful companions on this trip. Barb, BJ, Vicki, Dorothy, Cathi, and Sheila could barely sit still, they were so excited. Sharon looked like she might organize a Zumba class to expel some of her energy if they didn't board soon. The craze had enveloped Sharon completely. She even did the moves with tassels she'd learned to twirl expertly. Quite a

sight!

Now, instead of excitement, Lynn felt trepidation and fear that this trip was completely wrong for her. What could she be thinking to do this now? Next year, maybe. But it was ridiculous to have such thoughts after the amount of money she'd drawn from her savings to pay for the flight and tour. Luckily, her mother had sounded almost happy—and completely normal—when she'd called a few days ago. Mom actually mentioned Bill, asking if there could ever be reconciliation between them. So that's how he'd found out about her trip, prompting him to e-mail her. She'd need to talk to her mother about that after she got home.

Reconciliation after two years? Absolutely not. Lynn had realized, before their wedding plans had progressed very far, that being married to Bill would mean living most of her life lonely, even if they were home together every night. She'd cancelled their engagement, knowing Bill would find someone else—probably someone who worked in the same firm—and his life would continue with barely a ripple. She hadn't thought about him for a long time.

Now, though, after her mother's reminder and Bill's e-mail, she let her thoughts wander back to the break-up. She knew she'd made the right decision and thought he'd finally agreed, since

he'd cut off all communication with her after that night. But his e-mail indicated that might not be the case. His post had come straight to the point.

“Lynn, I can't stop thinking about you. About us. Please, can't we talk about it? I know you're going to Peru, but I can't for the life of me figure out why, other than something to do with school. I told you how unpleasant it was there. Maybe we can have dinner after you get back and you can tell me about your trip, which I hope will be more enjoyable than mine was. I'd like to see all your photos. Then, we can talk about what went wrong between

us and what we can do to make it right again. I still love you.”

“...what we can do to make it right again”? As if she’d been the one to ruin everything. And saying he “still” loved her was a joke. How could he stay away for two years if he’d ever loved her? The part about wanting to see her vacation photos didn’t ring true, either. He’d often said that watching vacation photos was an enormous bore. He hated going on vacation. It cost too much and he’d rather stay home and watch football or basketball or baseball or fishing. It would serve him right if she agreed to dinner—steak and lobster—then made him look at every photo with an extensive commentary for each one—at

Sharon's house—before escorting him to the door.

Never happen.

But his e-mail had brought back memories she'd locked in the back of her mind. Back in college, they'd both been busy and happy to meet whenever schedules allowed. They counted on having more quality time once they had their degrees and Bill was working for his father's firm in Charlottesville as a CPA. She'd applied for a teaching position there and was hired. He disappeared into the firm and rarely came out. She told herself that having a quiet accountant for a husband would be a good balance for her tendency to be frantic at times.

Teaching in a huge high school wasn't enjoyable at all for her because it increased her frenzy and never allowed her to feel like she was teaching one student at a time. The classes were larger than she preferred, so individual instruction was done through computer programs. She'd always dreamed of connecting with her students in a special way so she could instill a love of history in them. A field trip to the Frontier Culture Museum in Staunton would be a big incentive for students to behave in class and earn the right to go on the trip. But the monster school frowned on field trips because of the cost of bussing students, and because one teacher's field trip would lead to more teachers being

bombarded with requests for “excursions”—her principal’s word—so field trips were nixed the first time she brought up the idea.

Her evenings were spent grading papers, concocting endless lesson plans that were packed with detail she really didn’t need, and waiting endlessly for Bill to get tired of sitting at home all the time and decide to do something more exciting than watching men cast lures into lakes.

The intercom on the plane clicked on again, just as the plane taxied to the end of the runway for take-off. To alleviate the tension, Lynn always pictured huge yellow cartoon chicken feet on the bottom of the plane, running

faster and faster until they were spinning when the plane left the ground. Then, when the landing gear retracted, she imagined the feet being pulled into the plane and hearing a huge sigh from the big yellow chicken. Silly, but effective at relieving her fear of take-offs.

Her thoughts returned to Bill's e-mail. A wave of pain overwhelmed her, reliving the realization that she could never be happy married to an accountant who worked more than twelve hours a day in his office, then another two hours at home. During the two months they were engaged, Lynn had spent most of her time alone or with Sharon and their other friends. When Bill got to his house from work every evening, he was so

exhausted that most of the time he fell asleep, and forgot the plans they'd made. She'd learned she'd have to go to his house to see him after he'd finally gotten home, and usually cook supper for him. How anyone could sleep sitting in a chair at the dining table was still a mystery, but Bill could—and had—more times than she could count. Then he'd move to the couch, turn on the tv and fall asleep again.

Finally, after watching him fall asleep every night for weeks, after they'd announced their engagement, she'd had enough. He'd refused to choose a date for the wedding—couldn't choose a date because of tax season, he said. But there were always extensions

for clients that continued for months. He said they might be able to squeeze the wedding into his fall schedule, or maybe during the winter. Maybe. She'd left him asleep on the couch that night and gone to Sharon's house where she had wine and ended up sleeping on the couch.

The next morning, she thought about how her feelings for Bill had changed. He'd become a boring habit. She called his office mid-afternoon. The answering machine picked up. After listening to the boring canned message, the beep sounded. She took a deep breath before speaking.

"Bill, we have to talk. Tonight. I know how busy you are. You're always busy. And I know you're tired. As

always. But this is important. Be at my house at 8:00. If you don't show up, I'll know how little I mean to you."

He'd shown up—at 8:45—with effusive apologies and excuses about one of his clients, and what had to be finished by 9:00 in the morning. He'd stopped working after finally hearing her message and "finding a place to stop for a while," but said he had to go back to the office soon, where he'd probably have to work until midnight.

Lynn sat on the couch with her second glass of Kendall Jackson Chardonnay, listening to his excuses.

Bill finally noticed how she was staring at him. "Aren't you going to offer me a glass of wine?"

“Do you need an invitation? The bottle’s in the fridge. Glasses are in the cabinet.”

He disappeared into the kitchen. She heard him slam the cabinet door, open the fridge, then another slam, followed by the sound of the wine being poured into the glass. He appeared at the kitchen door with the bottle in one hand, the glass in the other. He drained it, then poured it full again.

“Damn, what a day this has been. What a week! A month! Maybe you knew that and wanted me to unwind tonight before my meetings tomorrow. If so, thanks. I needed this.” He drained the glass again, then refilled it about halfway. “What did you want to talk

about? The wedding? You know I'm leaving everything up to you. Whatever you want is fine with me. After I get past tax season, we'll take another look at my calendar and try to find a date that will work. I'm thinking Hawaii for our honeymoon. We could stay maybe three days before I have to get back. Does that sound good to you?" He stared at her, waiting. "It might be less crowded in the winter, if they have winter."

"You just don't get it, do you?"

Lynn covered her eyes with one hand. Tired. So tired.

"Get what?"

"That I'm nothing to you. I'm a convenience. You're married to that firm that will one day be yours after your

father retires. You see me only whenever you happen to wake up on the couch between games—or casts. We're engaged now! We're planning a wedding. Do you have any idea how long it's been since we've had a real conversation?"

"What? A week? I've been busy! You know how much my job means to me. Dad will be retiring in another five years. That will mean it will be my firm, for the most part. My income will be triple what it is now! Do you know what that will mean for us after we're married?"

Lynn let out a long sigh and closed her eyes again. "Unfortunately, yes. I'll see you even less than I do now.

Promotion means more work, bigger clients, more sixteen-hour days.”

“In the beginning, of course. But after a few years—”

“Sorry. I’m not willing to wait years for you to be awake when you get home each evening, so we can have dinner out once in a while, or go to a movie. You’ll never agree to take a real vacation. You don’t even want a honeymoon longer than three days, and I’m sure that includes travel time. You love your work a lot more than you love me—if you’ve ever loved me at all.”

The wine made it easy to blurt out her feelings, which she’d kept bottled up far too long. She poured the rest of the wine into her glass and downed it.

“That’s ridiculous. Your job keeps you busy in the evenings, grading papers and writing endless lesson plans. When I get home, I’m tired! Sometimes I work through lunch. I watch TV to unwind. What’s wrong with that?”

Lynn reached for a calendar she’d placed on the table at the end of the couch. “Take a look.” She pitched it to him, her head swimming with agitation.

Bill frowned, clearly annoyed with her, looked up, then drained his glass again. “What am I supposed to be looking at?”

“Your name. I wrote it on the days when we had lunch together or when we did something together other than watch sports or fishing.”

“So we had lunch twice in the past month. I know we scheduled lunch once more, but I couldn’t break away. That doesn’t mean it’s always going to be that way.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m finished. We aren’t getting married, Bill. We’ve been playing at being engaged, you won’t agree to a wedding date, because it isn’t important to you. It’s always going to be another couple of months, next fall, next year... Your work is always going to be the most important thing in your life. I’m finished being second.” She took off her engagement ring—his grandmother’s ring, which he’d said he was required to give to her—and laid it on the coffee table. “You

need a wife who's an accountant, too. That way, you'll both work late every night, and she won't be stuck at home alone, waiting for you to pencil her in on your schedule. She can pencil you in on hers."

She gave him a chance to digest what she'd said. He didn't respond. His expression hardened.

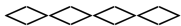
"It's over, Bill. I packed the few things you've left here. The box is by the door."

He picked up the wine bottle again, saw it was empty, then set it back down. "You'll regret this. Within a week, you'll be calling to tell me you made a big mistake, that you want us to be married so you can enjoy a life of

luxury. You wouldn't have to teach. You could stay home and raise our children."

"Luxury means nothing to me. I do want a husband someday. But it isn't going to be you. I have no desire to raise children by myself. And, I'd like to be able to take a vacation with my husband—my family—without having to schedule it years in advance."

She got up from the couch, took the bottle and the glasses to the kitchen and dropped the bottle into the recycling bin. From there, she went to her bedroom and slammed the door. A minute later, she heard the front door slam, followed by the roar of his new Mercedes.



Lynn wished for a glass of wine.

She flagged the flight attendant and asked for a glass of Chardonnay.

Had she ever really loved Bill? She had to admit that she hadn't. They met, gone out for dinner a couple of times, and their relationship felt comfortable, since he never asked anything of her except cooking for him once in a while. Then his job became more demanding, his hours had increased, and she'd spent more time with Sharon than with him.

How had she ever thought she could be married to a workaholic? Yet, according to Sharon, that's exactly what Lynn had become, with no time for dating or a relationship, and no time during the summer for anything but

writing endless lesson plans. Actually, she re-copied lesson plans. She'd taught the same lessons, year after year, and could've used the same plans over and over. Transferring them from one planning book to another made them seem fresh, somehow, when they weren't.

The wine arrived. She poured it into a plastic glass and drank it. All of it.

Closing her eyes, she sighed. Sharon was right. Lynn needed this break from her dull, boring life. Desperately. How long had it been since she'd been on vacation? A real vacation! Too long. For the next two weeks, she didn't want to think about anything except Peru.

When they got home, she'd visit her parents, then take a long look at what her life had become.

Chapter 3

Sharon poked Lynn's arm. "You haven't said a word since we got on this plane. Are you asleep with your eyes open? I saw you checking e-mail. Are we getting a signal?"

Lynn moved around a little, shaking off the memory. "No. I got a post from Bill before we took off."

"Good grief. You haven't heard from him in years. What did he want?"

Lynn scrolled down to the post and handed the phone to Sharon, who read it with a look of anger.

"He waited two years to tell you he still loves you? That creep! What did

you tell him?”

“Nothing. I’m not going to answer.” Lynn took the phone back and deleted the post.

“Good for you! No matter what you say, he’s going to take any response as an admission that he’s right. And he’s not right, dammit! You don’t need him to be happy! Right?”

Lynn hesitated. “Right.”

Sharon leaned back. “Oh no. Don’t tell me you’re thinking about going back to the jerk?”

“No. I don’t want to be married to someone who’s happier doing tax returns than going to a movie. I even tried to get him interested in history after his trip to Peru, but he never listened.

Just kept watching football or baseball or whatever it had been, then said, ‘What? I hated that trip.’” Lynn closed her eyes. “I deserve better.”

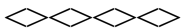
“Right,” Sharon mumbled. “Want me to answer the post for you? I’ll pretend I’m you—with guts.” She grinned.

“No, thanks. He wouldn’t read it anyway. Not until after three tax returns and watching someone catch a big fish.”

“He may try to call you.”

“I doubt we’ll have cell phone service in Peru. He’ll give up after getting no answer the second time, if he takes time to call me at all.” She leaned her seat back as far as it would go and closed her eyes, wishing for sleep.

Sharon patted her arm then did the same.



After midnight, when their plane finally landed in Lima, Lynn's joints felt like cement. The flight from Virginia to Houston had been long enough, then a short layover and another six and a half hours to Lima. All she wanted now was a bed with a comfortable mattress and her down pillow, which she'd squeezed into her suitcase to make sure she slept well on this trip.

How Sharon had actually slept most of the way, Lynn could only guess. She'd probably taken one of those little white pills that knocked her out completely. Lynn had tried to watch a movie from the extensive list, but the

engine noise, coupled with frequent announcements that paused the action in the most inconvenient places, made it impossible to maintain any sort of continuity, so she'd given up after the third announcement. The fussy toddler across from them, who wore her poor mother out with her refusal to sleep, didn't help, either.

When they left the plane, Lynn felt some of the excitement return that she'd accumulated over the past three weeks. But what greeted them wasn't at all what she'd hoped. The terminal was packed with wall-to-wall people, retrieving luggage, going through customs, and trying to find those who waited for deplaning passengers. Speaking to

anyone in their group required yelling above the chaos of voices speaking multiple languages all around them. To top it all, there were young women everywhere trying to rent cell phones to tourists. Lynn discovered quickly that her cell phone was completely useless in Lima, but she declined their offers—again and again and again—thinking it might be nice to spend two weeks without having to constantly check e-mail, texts, and missed phone calls from people she didn't want to talk to. She knew her mother wouldn't call, and wouldn't want her to call, either. Her father preferred e-mail. They'd brought Sharon's laptop, knowing they'd have wireless in the hotels.

After they were finally free of the technicalities involved with entering a foreign country, they struggled to stay together when they entered a huge area even more congested than the one they'd left. In the midst of a tangle of hundreds of people and sheer chaos, she realized the people who held signs were waiting for family members, or they were tour guides pushing their way to the front of the roped-off area to thrust their signs at everyone they saw, yelling the names of those they had come to meet. Lynn had no idea how their group had been labeled for this tour, so the signs meant nothing to her.

Eventually, a sign appeared toward the end of a long line of people

that had Barb's name scrawled with a black marker that clearly had been almost out of ink. They hurried toward the young woman holding the sign.

"Barbara Webber? From Virginia?" she asked each of them.

Barb worked her way to the front of the group. "I'm Barbara!"

"Welcome to Lima! You and your group please follow me!" She spoke in Spanish to two men behind her who hurried to grab everyone's luggage and pile it on a big cart.

Lynn was happy to relinquish her heavy suitcase and her carry-on bag so all she had to carry was her purse, which was heavy enough by itself. She wondered if one of the men handling the

luggage could be their guide. Barb's friend in Texas had recommended the guide she and her husband had had on their tour after they'd gotten to Cusco. Barb requested that he guide them in Lima as well as in Cusco and Machu Picchu. Alex. She couldn't remember his last name.

She asked the young woman with the sign, "Which one is Alex, our guide?"

"He isn't here tonight. We'll get you to the hotel. Alex flew in from Cusco this afternoon and will be there in the morning. He'll be staying at your hotels in Cusco, the Sacred Valley, and in Machu Picchu, too."

Lynn hoped he'd be friendly, as

well as informed about everything they saw. Barb had raved about him, based on what she'd heard from her Texas friend. Lynn had the blank book in her purse to record anything significant from the tour. Years as a teacher had taught her how faulty her memory could be. She wondered how many pages would be filled after two weeks of touring.

The van ride to the hotel proved to be harrowing, to say the least. Traffic in Lima was horrible! Atrocious! Unbelievable! Across three lanes of traffic, four cars squeezed in, passing, turning in front of each other, honking, jockeying for position, with sometimes only inches between them! The noise by itself was enough to drive anyone crazy

who wasn't used to such traffic. Their driver, who had been introduced as a "professional driver," appeared calm and not in the least concerned about almost being bashed every few seconds. Before long, Lynn stared straight ahead and took deep breaths to try and keep her heart from racing. This tour might end before it had a chance to begin!

"I hope we get to the hotel in one piece," Sharon told Lynn in a shaky voice. The rest of the group nodded agreement in between gasps and yelps of fear when a bus passing them almost scraped the side of the van!

It took them almost an hour to get to the hotel—the Casa Andina Private Collection Lima. By the time they

arrived, they were even more exhausted than when they'd arrived at the airport. Lynn wondered if this was what they'd have to endure every day on this tour.

When the “professional driver” parked, everyone cheered for him. He'd performed numerous miracles getting them there safely. When Lynn stepped down onto the sidewalk in front of the hotel, traffic noise was even louder than it had been inside the van. She hoped their rooms would be quiet enough to sleep.

They filed into the lobby and were pleasantly surprised to find it completely quiet and almost deserted at this late hour. At least that much was what she'd expected. Their reservations were

entirely in order. All they had to do was produce their passports, which would be returned by their escorts in a few minutes, along with the keys to their rooms.

Lynn wandered through the lobby while waiting for her passport and key, admiring the gorgeous bar, antique furniture, and enormous flower arrangements. She noticed a man sitting on one of the overstuffed couches, smiling and nodding at each person in the group. When he finally turned to smile and nod at her, she instantly smiled back. His eyes were kind and generous and friendly, and his smile reached them, producing an expression of welcome and contentment. Was he

waiting for someone at this late hour?

“Let’s go!” Sharon grabbed her arm and shoved her passport and key into her hands. “Our luggage is on that cart. Third floor. We have to get to bed. They’re coming to get us at nine in the morning!”

“Nine? It’s going to be close to two-thirty before we get to bed!”

“That’s why we have to move it!”

Lynn followed Sharon, but turned back to see if the others were coming. Then she realized the man from the lobby stood behind her, also waiting for the elevator.

“Welcome to Peru,” he said softly in a melodic Spanish accent.

“Thank you. Do you live here?”

Lynn realized, since he was a guest at the hotel, he most likely did not live in Lima. Dumb question!

“I live in Cusco. I am your guide for this tour.” He offered his hand. “Alex Vereau.”

Lynn noticed his hands were smooth and his touch gentle. “I’m glad to meet you, Alex. You came highly recommended.” Sharon shook his hand next, grinning ear to ear.

Barb leaned between Lynn and Sharon to shake Alex’s hand next. “I’m Barb. Linda raved about how much you knew about Peru! That’s why we asked for you.”

Alex closed his eyes and gave a little bow. “I will have to thank her

again. She told me you were coming. *Muchas gracias*. I will see all of you in the morning.”

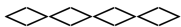
They got into the elevator. With eight of them, the car was full. Alex told them he'd take the next car. Lynn caught herself leaning when the doors closed, to prolong her view of him. When she leaned into Sharon, who was leaning for the same reason, Alex laughed and waved at them.

Idiots. They were acting like students!

Sharon sighed. “I just knew I'd fall in love with our guide. No use wasting time. I'm in love already!”

Lynn felt an odd stab of jealousy. Ridiculous. No flings, remember! She

was in Peru for a working vacation. Not to fall in love with a handsome Peruvian!



Alex waited for the next car and rode to the third floor to his room. When he emerged from the elevator, he saw the blonde woman he'd spoken to, and her red-headed friend, entering a room at the end of the hall. When they saw him, the redhead waved and laughed. The blonde smiled before following her friend into the room. Did he detect a bit of pink in her cheeks? Probably just the lighting. But she was lovely. He especially liked her blue eyes.

Alex had no idea what to expect from this group, just as he never knew

what to expect from any group. Now, though, the idea of spending two weeks with a beautiful woman with blonde hair, blue eyes, and a shy smile made him happier than he'd been in a long time. He pulled a list of names from his pocket. Which one was she, he wondered? In the morning, he'd ask her name.

Chapter 4

Sharon disappeared into the bathroom immediately while Lynn chose one of the queen-sized beds and turned the covers back. She heard the shower. All those long hours on the plane had been spent in anticipation, excitement, and fatigue, followed by complete exhaustion. After that harrowing ride to the hotel, hot water was exactly what they both needed to be able to sleep the rest of the night. Breakfast was included in their stay at Casa Andina, so they'd have to be up no later than seven if they were going to get dressed, to the restaurant off the lobby for the breakfast

buffet, then back to the room for a few minutes before it was time to leave at nine.

Lynn wandered around the room and stopped before a set of figures on the wall that seemed to be a mother, father, and child. But all three were naked, with nothing hidden. She'd seen the same three figures in the lobby. Were they specific to the hotel, or to Lima, or to Peru? She had no idea. She looked at the rest of the décor. It was a perfect blend of earth tones and soft patterns. She opened the curtains on the huge windows at one end of the room but couldn't see much outside. There were lights on vehicles, but no way to see the buildings clearly, or anything in the

distance. Mountains or the Pacific?

Lynn realized she should have gone through the tour information while on the plane. Right now, her mind was so muddled, she couldn't remember what they were scheduled to see tomorrow. No, make that later today.

Sharon emerged from the bathroom wrapped in a towel. "Your turn!"

"Thanks." Lynn headed for the bathroom and immediately turned the hot water back on to keep the room steamy and warm. After washing away muscle tension, and a kink in her back from that awful seat on the plane from Houston, she washed her long hair, turned the water off with regret that she couldn't

stay longer, then stepped out onto the mat. She enjoyed the soft towel on her skin, and slipped into the red flannel pajamas she'd bought just for this vacation. By the time she'd combed her hair, creamed her face, and brushed her teeth, Sharon was in bed, almost asleep.

Lynn tiptoed to her own bed.

Sharon roused. "I set the alarm for 7:00. We'll have to eat breakfast and have our teeth brushed by 9:00, when the van gets here."

"Great. For our first day of touring, I'll be half-asleep." She settled into the soft sheets and pulled the comforter up around her neck. "One more night here, right?"

"Right. Then on to Cusco. No

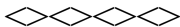
more talking. Sleep.”

Lynn appreciated the pillowtop mattress, and relaxed into her down pillow.

“So far so good,” she whispered. Sharon was already asleep.

Lynn turned off the light and closed her eyes. Just before she drifted off, she remembered Alex Vereau’s smile, his kind eyes, and heard his laugh just before the elevator door closed.

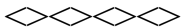
She whispered again, “So far so good.”



Alex appreciated the group’s request that he stay at the hotels where the group would be staying on this tour. Usually, he went home to Cusco every

evening and got up early to return to wherever they were staying for the next morning's tour. Of course, he usually didn't do the part of the tour in Lima.

After a shower, he fell into bed, turned off the light, and closed his eyes. Her face still lingered in his memory. He definitely had to learn her name first thing in the morning.



When the alarm went off, Lynn wanted to turn over and go back to sleep. Sharon was already dragging herself into the bathroom to dress and, as she always said, “find her face and glue it back on.”

Lynn got up and went to the windows to check out the view. What

she saw was nothing she'd expected. Full cloud cover. No sun at all. Fog. The poem, "Fog," by Carl Sandburg came to mind. It ended with "then moved on." This fog, though, showed no sign of moving anywhere, on "little cat feet" or any other way. It engulfed everything she could see—buildings that, in places, looked like someone had put them up with colored cardboard, and people scurrying below, dressed in warm clothes with jackets. The morning traffic appeared to be as bad as it had been last night, even at this early hour.

"Sharon! Come look at this! Our first glimpse of Lima!"

Sharon emerged, trying to poke earrings through her earlobes. She

looked, but didn't say anything for a minute. "Okay. Where are the mountains? The Pacific? And look at the traffic! It must be morning rush hour. Or second rush hour? I think I read there are about eight million people in the Lima area. They may have rush hour all day long!"

"I have no idea which direction we're facing, so I have no clue about the ocean or mountains. Since the sun is completely obscured, we can't tell which way is east. For that matter, where is the sun? We obviously got here on a rainy day. It's winter here, after all. Maybe the fog and clouds will burn off by this afternoon. Where are we going first?"

“Not sure. Some ruins with a huge pyramid, I think. Then the Larco Museum for a tour and late lunch. According to my guide book, the grounds around that Museum are covered with flowers, every color you can imagine. Don’t forget your camera!”

As if anyone on this tour could forget to bring a camera! Lynn rushed to the bathroom to get ready, with Sharon coaxing her constantly.

“You look gorgeous! No need to mar that natural beauty with a lot of make-up! Just brush your hair and let it fly!”

Lynn managed to get ready in record time, in spite of the fatigue from lack of sleep. At least she’d be able to

rest a little on the bus on the way. She brushed her hair back into a pony tail and secured it with an elastic band.

Downstairs, after breakfast, Alex waited by the front door. “The van is here. Watch your step getting on.” He was wearing a white straw hat with a moss green and cranberry hatband that crossed in the back. He nodded to her and held the door.

“It’s foggy this morning.”

“Yes, it’s always foggy here in the winter.”

“How many months of winter do you have?”

“Nine.”

Lynn stopped and stared at him.

“Nine? When it is not winter?”

“January, February, and March. That’s when Lima has sun and rain.”

“Doesn’t it rain during the winter?”

“Never. Just thick clouds and fog. Watch your step getting on the van. The steps will be damp.”

He offered his hand and she took it. Again, she noticed his soft touch. His other hand in the middle of her back—to steady her, he said—felt just as nice. She made her way into the back row of seats next to Sharon.

“Did you hear what he said about there being no sunshine or rain here except during the summer?”

“Yes, but it’s hard to believe. How can people live without sun and

rain for three-fourths of the year?”

“I guess the fog and clouds won’t be burning off by the afternoon.”

Alex greeted them and expressed his hope that they’d enjoy their tour. He asked if they would tell him their names, which he promised to forget the minute he heard them.

Lynn smiled at that. They began in the front. She and Sharon were last to share their names. When he heard her name, he smiled and paused for a couple of seconds before getting back to his narrative about Peru. He seemed to be making an effort to establish eye contact with each person, but did he look at her more often than the others?

They experienced another

harrowing ride through Lima, with Alex pointing out buildings and plazas and other sites, then giving brief information about each one. A great deal of what he told them had to do with Lima's history, and that of the country. Lynn was surprised at how quickly she got used to the traffic, in spite of all the honking and street noises. She was finally able to look out the windows and still concentrate on what Alex was telling them without being overly distracted by the extraordinary number of cars, trucks, and buses, and the honking that never seemed to stop. Alex explained that the drivers used hand signals to let other drivers know when they needed to change lanes or turn. Amazingly, all the

drivers responded to these signals.

The only time Lynn and the others became concerned was when the van turned onto a street that had been closed in preparation for the festival coming up on the weekend—Peruvian Independence Day, according to Alex. The only way the driver could get out of the dead-end street was to back up, forcing cars behind them to also back up. Lynn noticed the hand signals the driver used to let the cars behind know what he was doing. He curved back the way they'd come, onto the street he'd turned off of, forcing even more vehicles to back up until he was straight on the main street. Then he drove ahead and traffic resumed as usual. Neither he nor Alex

seemed to think much about it, and there hadn't been even one fender-bender during the process.

"It happens all the time," Alex said, and smiled at Lynn.

By the time they were moving again, she noticed that the traffic moved in an odd sort of rhythm, without any hint of a crash or even a disagreement between drivers. Surely, they had accidents all the time, though.

"Alex, are there many wrecks in Lima?" Lynn asked him.

"Wrecks?" He didn't seem to understand the question.

"Cars crashing into each other in traffic."

"Oh! No. Everyone knows the

rules.”

Rules? Lynn and Sharon looked at each other, then at Barb, B. J., Cathi, Vicki, Dorothy and Sheila. Lynn saw the same expression on each face—disbelief! She couldn’t imagine trying to drive in Lima in a car, much less a van or bus! Truly, their driver had to be a “professional” in order to assure the safety of his passengers! At that point, Lynn decided it wasn’t worth worrying about the traffic any longer. Instead, she took a deep breath and focused on listening to Alex’s description of the places they passed. One thing was obvious. The citizens of Lima loved flower gardens. They were everywhere! She took photos through the window as

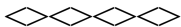
they sped along, but didn't have much hope of their coming out very well because of the movement of the van, and because of the gloom created by the cloud cover. Everything would probably come out gray. It was then she realized that everything they saw had the same general color superimposed over the colors below—a dull gray-brown.

“Alex, what is this gray-brown color on everything?”

He hesitated before answering. “Dirt. Exhaust. It does not rain here for many months, so the grime of daily life is never washed clean until the summer, when the rainy season comes.”

Lynn didn't know what to say about that, so she just smiled an apology

for having asked the question. Alex continued his commentary on the way to the first ruins they'd be touring—a place called Pachacamac, which Lynn had read about when she'd taught a unit on pyramids of the world last year. When his commentary paused, Alex shrugged a little. As much as he loved his country, there were things about it that weren't beautiful, even to him. She wished she hadn't asked.



Pachacamac was only twenty miles from Lima, but Alex explained it would take almost an hour to get there. Still disoriented, Lynn asked which direction they were going. South, he said, into the Lurin Valley, where

several groups of people had lived before the Inca arrived in the 1200s—the pre-Incan cultures. Some of those cultures were called the Moche, the Wari, and the Nazca. He talked about them all the way, but Lynn had a hard time paying attention. So, she watched Alex gesturing as he explained what they'd be seeing while pointing out places of interest along the way.

It was fascinating how much Alex knew all about this area, and not only general information. He knew specifics and never hesitated even a few seconds before answering questions the group put to him. The smile he wore constantly was proof that he loved his job as a guide.

Before long, she actually dozed off, until the van swerved to miss another tour bus going the other direction.

“What did I miss?” she whispered to Sharon.

“About three hundred years,” Sharon whispered back with a smile.

When they reached the ruins, the driver parked the van and everyone got out. Lynn had read that these ruins included pyramids that, when newly built, were even higher and more massive than the pyramids on the Giza Plateau in Egypt. That was hard for her to imagine, having seen the pyramids of Khufu, Khafre, and Menkaure in television specials. One of the primary

differences between the Giza pyramids and the ones here at Pachacamac was the way they were built. These pyramids were built of adobe and had eroded quite a bit over the centuries, while the Giza pyramids were built of limestone.

The bases of the Pachacamac pyramids were still enormous, but the tops had lost a great deal of height since they were built in the first century AD. According to Alex, the Lima civilization that built these pyramids reached their peak during the tenth century AD. The Incas followed in the 1400s, conquered the site, and turned it into a truly magnificent place.

“Here, you can see the Temple of the Sun and the Mamacuña palace,

where women chosen by the king lived. If you like, you can climb to the top of the Pyramid of the Sun”—he pointed —“so you can see the river, trees, and other vegetation that grow on the south and southwest sides of the pyramid, and the Pacific Ocean to the west.” Alex introduced them to a guide who spent every day at Pachacamac who would accompany them up the pyramid. Alex would follow to make sure everyone climbed safely and to answer questions from those too far from the guide to be heard.

Lynn was so tired, she didn't want to use up her energy climbing that enormous structure. How on earth was she going to keep up through so many

days of touring?

“I’m going to stay here, I think,” she told Sharon, who looked relieved and said she’d stay with her.

Alex told her he understood the stresses of long flights. “Our driver will be in the van if you wish to sit inside.” He turned toward the pyramid. He turned once and smiled at them. At her? “Are you sure you don’t want to go?”

Sharon took a deep breath, then said, “Why not?” She gave Lynn a look that said she’d even climb a pyramid to spend some time with their guide.

Lynn pulled out the guide book on Peru that she’d brought, and tried to read about the site, but she couldn’t focus and kept nodding off. So, she watched the

long line of tourists ascending the pyramid on a well-traveled pathway, and tried to pick out their group. There was Barb next to Vicki and B.J., with Cathi, Dorothy and Sheila right behind. Sheila was turned halfway toward Alex, who gestured in the way Lynn had already identified as his way of embellishing whatever he was teaching. Sharon brought up the rear beside Alex. Lynn could imagine the look on her face—fascination. His white hat didn't shine in the sun, since there was no sun, but it was certainly brighter than the color of the pyramid and all the ground around it.

She realized, then, that the site—all of it—was the same gray-brown as the city had been. No wonder she

couldn't muster any energy. One thing she loved about Virginia was the vast array of color. A hundred shades of green in the foliage, thousands of flowers of every hue, and buildings constructed with a thousand different materials in distinctive colors, gave her all the energy she ever needed. This monochrome environment was overpowering her.

Lynn looked for a place where she could sit and simply become part of the site. People wandered everywhere. She left the pathway to cut across an area covered in footprints, but a man in uniform called to her with a frown on his face. Her Spanish wasn't great, but she could tell he didn't like her cutting

across that area. She mumbled, “Sorry. I didn’t realize—“

He walked toward her, waving one arm in a gesture clearly meant to direct her back onto the path.

Well. That was interesting. He clearly did not want her walking on his dirt!

She decided to do as Alex had suggested and sit on the bus. She made her way back and found the driver asleep in his seat. She tiptoed past him, but he still roused. When he saw her, he got out and stood by the front of the bus.

Sinking into the soft seat, Lynn took several deep breaths and tried to wake up a little. She thumbed through the guide book, wondering what it must it

have been like to live here. Thousands of people had called Pachacamac home through the centuries. Did they have full cloud cover most of the year back then? If so, did they paint their homes and the pyramid bright colors to make up for the absence of color around them? She'd ask Alex when he got back.

That turned her thoughts to Alex. Was he married? Did he have a girlfriend? The answer, she knew, had to be yes to at least one or the other. He was too handsome and pleasant not to have someone who loved him, and who enjoyed being with him whenever he wasn't sharing the history of Peru to a group of *turistas*. She'd have to ask him. But why did it matter? She

shouldn't be interested in his personal life, but she was. She wanted to know if, at the end of the day, he'd be going home to a woman who loved and appreciated him, the way he clearly deserved to be appreciated. For a moment she envied him.

Then she realized she didn't know him at all. How could she? They'd been in the same space—at the hotel last night, then in the van this morning—for only a few hours. When he wasn't being a guide, he might be a completely different person, but she doubted it. There was a goodness about him that couldn't be faked. She felt comfortable around him. Surely, if he weren't as nice off duty as he was to the group, she

could tell. Then, she wondered what he thought about all of them? What did he think about her? To him, she was only another *turista*—and a puny, tired one at that! He probably thought she was out of shape since she hadn't had the energy to tour even the first place he'd taken the group.

Or maybe he understood that she was just tired from the long flight. Peru was the same as Eastern Time in the U.S., so jet lag wasn't the answer. Finishing another school year, knowing she'd be teaching history backward next year, and not having the energy to jump into the planning of that new curriculum (even though Sharon thought she'd been as enthusiastic as she always was during

the summer) was part of her lethargy, too.

Burnout? Of course not. She loved teaching. But right now, teaching seemed like a job instead of an adventure. She'd come to Peru expecting to recharge her enthusiasm. That obviously wouldn't happen if she couldn't climb a pyramid!

It wasn't long before the others returned. From the looks of exhilaration they displayed, Lynn wished she'd gone with them.

"So, how was it?"

"Wonderful! Are you feeling okay?" Barb held her hand to Lynn's forehead. "You aren't warm. Just tired?"

"I was. But I'm feeling better. Thanks."

Alex urged them back into the van for a short drive to the small museum that displayed artifacts of Pachacamac, which proved to be interesting. Yet, Lynn still had difficulty working up enthusiasm for what she was seeing. Maybe lunch would help her perk up a little.

Alex's expression included concern. She smiled to let him know she was okay. But was she?



Alex worried about this lovely *turista*. How could she be tired already? They had so many more places to go and see! He'd never expected her to stay behind on the first set of ruins. Yet, there seemed to be something other than

fatigue causing her to choose not to climb the pyramid. What could it be? He decided he'd sit with her at lunch and see if he couldn't coax a smile from her.

Chapter 5

When they got to the Larco Museum, Lynn walked along the winding ramp almost in a daze. Flowers surrounded them, yet she couldn't focus on their beauty. All she could see was the overcast sky, muting the colors until they almost appeared dull and lifeless. Under full sun, they would've been spectacular.

They were going to have lunch, then tour the Museum. Diners sat outside on the patio. Several tables had been pushed together to accommodate their group, plus Alex and the driver. The

chairs were red, green, and other colors, adding a festive touch. If only the sun would shine! Lynn sat at the end of the table, facing the bougainvillea.

Bougainvillea was one of her mother's favorites. She'd always hung baskets of them on her covered porch during the summer. What would she think about so many different colors? Lynn realized she was almost holding her breath. She closed her eyes, took a long, deep breath, then Sharon, seated beside her, nudged her elbow.

“Are you okay? You look...weird.”

“Thanks. I'm fine. Just wiped out by very little sleep and a morning in a gray-brown environment.”

Sharon's forehead wrinkled.

"You're right. The whole place was kind of drab. It was beautiful from the top of the pyramid, though. There were all kinds of trees and shrubs down by the river." Sharon paused. "What's wrong? Are you thinking about your mother?"

Lynn nodded. "She would've loved the flowers." Tears stung her eyes and she reached for the cloth napkin and dabbed them away. "Nothing I can do for her here."

"Not even if you were at her house, waiting on her hand and foot, which she'd hate. Parents do what parents do. They don't usually ask their children if what they decide is okay."

Lynn smiled at her friend. "I know.

Mom will be okay. I just wish the timing had been better.”

At the end of the table, next to Lynn, Alex scraped the chair back and sat down. He smiled at Lynn and Sharon, then frowned. “What’s wrong, *Señorita*? I see sadness in your beautiful eyes.”

What a charmer he was. Lynn smiled back. “It’s nothing. I’m just ready for some good Peruvian food!”

“It won’t be long.” He studied her expression again. “I hope to see you smile when you taste the *ceviche*.”

“I promise I will.” Without thinking, she patted his hand, then felt her face flush with embarrassment when he turned his hand and his fingers closed around hers. She hesitated only a

moment before placing her hands in her lap. “What are we having for lunch?”

“You have choices for each course. It’s all very delicious, I promise.”

She glanced toward the building, seeking a distraction. “Look at those incredible staghorn ferns trailing down the walls!”

Sharon exclaimed and pointed them out to the others. Lynn stole a glance at Alex, who was still smiling at her.

“Did you see the Indian Paintbrush?” He pointed.

“Beautiful.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “Very beautiful.”

The waiters brought drinks to everyone. Alex spoke up so everyone could hear. “This is a Peruvian drink I know you all will love. It’s called a Pisco Sour.”

Lynn sipped, then smiled and sipped again. “It tastes a little like a margarita, only sharper. Is it made with tequila?”

Alex laughed. “No, it’s made with Pisco, which is made from white grapes. It’s a type of brandy.”

“I love it!” Vicki said, and the others agreed. They gave their food orders to the waiters, then returned to conversation. Sharon chattered enough for Lynn, too, which she appreciated. Dorothy, sitting across from Lynn,

questioned Alex more about the Pyramid of the Sun. Lynn tried to pay attention, but her mind wandered to New Mexico, then back to when Alex had briefly held her hand.

When the waiters arrived with their food, Alex got everyone's attention and pointed to a large spoon on each plate, containing vegetables and what appeared to be fish and shrimp. "This is *ceviche*. See if you like it."

Lynn tasted it. There was a strong taste of lime. "It's delicious. Not at all what I expected."

"It's made with several kinds of raw seafood, marinated in lime juice."

"The lime cooks the seafood, right?"

“Yes. I love it.”

Lynn noticed that his plate was half-covered in *ceviche*. Lynn had ordered several different foods, including a type of potatoes in sauce. She enjoyed everything and began to feel more awake and energetic. She hadn’t had a lot of breakfast this morning—only what was on the buffet at the hotel—so she suspected she just needed food.

After lunch, with her head swimming a little from the Pisco Sour—which she’d definitely want to try again—they wandered through the courtyard, marveling at the flowers, then back up the ramp to the *Museo de Larco*. A museum guide took over and showed them through the incredible collection of

pre-Inca artifacts, including thousands of vessels made by the Moche.

The guide explained, “The Inca did not have a written language, but archeologists have learned a great deal about how they lived from the drawings painted on the pots, bowls, and other vessels they used.”

Lynn couldn't believe how many vessels had survived the conquest of the Spanish. Seeing the Inca as pagan people, the Spanish had done everything they could to destroy the Inca civilization and all traces of their religion. Yet, here, recorded on their pottery, were depictions of their daily life as vivid and detailed as any written record might have been. What a treasure!

There were several large rooms filled with glass shelves holding this miraculous record. The Inca had survived the conquest of their country in spite of everything the Spanish had done to obliterate it.

Lynn could've spent a full day in the Larco Museum, studying each vessel more carefully, trying to imagine what it must have been like to be an Inca woman. She also wished she could take a closer look at the magnificent *kipus*. An astonishing creation of knotted strings hanging side by side from a cross string, each *kipu*'s knots had been tied in specific ways. No two were the same. Lynn had read about these forms of keeping records of livestock, food

supplies, people—whatever needed to be counted—but she'd never seen a real one. It resembled an intricate necklace. Perhaps she'd be able to buy a *kipu* necklace at one of the markets.

Unfortunately, their time at the museum was brief. Before she was anywhere near ready to leave, it was time to get back on the bus to speed off to their next destination.

Lynn and Sharon were last to board.

“Did you enjoy the museum?”
Alex asked Lynn.

“Extremely. The Inca are still alive in their pottery and in the *kipus*.”

“Yes. And there are still millions of Inca alive today. Including me.”

“You’re Inca?”

“Partly. The Mestizo Indians are descended from the Inca.” He turned his head. “Don’t you love my beautiful Inca nose?”

Lynn and the others who heard him laughed and agreed that it was, indeed, a beautiful nose.

When Alex took her hand to guide her onto the bus, he said, quietly, “I am happy you are feeling better.” Lynn turned to thank him. He brought her hand to his lips and kissed her fingers.

She made her way to the back and sat down beside Sharon, who grinned at her. “Well, well. For someone who wasn’t interested in a fling, you seem to have attracted the attention of our most

handsome Peruvian guide.”

“You’re being silly. He’s just nice, that’s all.”

“He didn’t kiss *my* hand when he helped *me* onto the bus.”

Lynn didn’t have an answer for that, so she gazed out the windows to see what Alex was describing. Then she realized he’d stopped narrating for a moment and was quiet for a change. She leaned over just enough to look between the seats and saw him sitting in the front passenger seat, turned around, smiling at her.

Time to break the trance. “Where are we going next?” she called.

Alex stood and launched into a description of the next place on their

itinerary.

Lynn tried to keep her mind on what he was saying, but thoughts of home and her parents interfered with her concentration, along with their guide's kind eyes and gentle touch. She had to nip this in the bud. She'd promised Sharon—and herself—no romantic flings on this trip. They were in another country, on another continent—and in a different hemisphere, for goodness sake. After this tour, they'd be back in Virginia. Alex would be in Peru! Long-distance relationships simply didn't work. Talk about long-distance! How many thousand miles was it from Virginia to Peru? She'd have to look it up so she could tell her students next

year when they studied the Inca.

They arrived at a cathedral and wandered through the enormous building, with statues of saints and the Virgin Mary in alcoves along the sides and benches for worshipers in the center. A hallway along the side of the huge room had more alcoves and benches for people who wanted to sit and pray.

Since Lynn wasn't Catholic, she felt no real connection to this cathedral that meant so much to the people who had come here for exactly that reason—closeness and connection. That thought triggered another. Tremendous distances were possible between two people sitting in the same room together, just as

closeness was possible between two people who were physically far apart.

Her parents, for example, had often shared a home, yet never stayed in the same room for longer than a meal. Her father had his office and her mother had hers, and that's where they went after having supper in the kitchen, reading or going through notes for lectures at the table instead of having a conversation about the day's activities. What had her mother said? They'd grown apart. While living in the same house.

Lynn watched Alex's expressions while he talked quietly, not wanting to intrude on those who were there to worship. From what Sharon had told

her, he usually didn't conduct tours in Lima, but Barb had requested he be their guide throughout their tour. He specialized in tours of Cusco, the Sacred Valley, and Machu Picchu. Didn't she remember something about him taking groups to Nazca to see the enormous outlines of animals and figures on the Nazca Plains? She'd always wanted to see them. Maybe the next time they came — She shook her head. The next time? She was hardly paying attention this time!

She had come to experience the land of the Inca, to tour the Incan capital city of Cusco, and to see the Inca city that had captured the imagination of anyone who'd ever seen the classic

photograph of Machu Picchu.

It was clearly time for her to wake up, physically and mentally, and remember why she was here! If she couldn't pay attention to Alex's expert explanations of what they were seeing through the windows of the bus, then she had no business being here. Being here was a once-in-a-lifetime gift to herself! It was time to savor every minute of this miraculous experience, and that included enjoying her new friendship with Alex Vereau. Not a fling! A friendship. Just because he'd kissed her hand didn't mean they were more than friends. Right?

Chapter 6

They got back to the hotel, went upstairs, then gathered in the lobby about an hour later. While they were waiting for the bus to take them to dinner, Lynn was called to the Front Desk for a phone call.

“Dad? Has something happened?”

“Everything is fine. I just wanted you to know that I’m home with your mother now, full time. She had another...episode. She decided to go to lunch today and ended up in Albuquerque. She had no idea where she was or how she’d gotten there.”

“How did you find her?”

“She wandered into a restaurant, then tried to leave without paying for her meal. She told them her husband was supposed to meet her and he’d pay for lunch, and that she had a migraine that was blinding her. The owner called the police. They found my contact information in her purse and called me. Sam went with me to get her. She was quiet all the way home. By then, the migraine had eased off, and she’d realized what had happened.”

“Is she on any medication that could’ve caused this?”

“Not that I know of. We’ll see the doctor tomorrow. I talked to my boss and told him I had to take my accumulated vacation and sick leave

time immediately. I have about three months' worth. At that point, I'll retire. So I'm home now, full time. If this should happen again, I'll be here."

"I'm so sorry you had to give up your job."

"It's okay. It's a relief not to have to leave her each morning, wondering what she'll do during the day. Our doctor is looking for other explanations for her confusion and memory loss. We'll get through this. I'll help your mother get through it."

"The bus is leaving, so I have to go. I'm getting e-mail on Sharon's laptop. That's probably better than calling, unless it's an emergency. I love you!"

Lynn hurried out to the bus and explained everything to Sharon. She was shaken by her father's call, but she also felt relief that he'd be with her mother every day.

A fairly short drive took them to the restaurant. There were long tables with chairs pushed close together, to get the maximum number of people seated. Musicians playing guitars and other instruments sat near an oval-shaped stage area near the side wall. The excessive volume made conversation difficult. Tables for the buffet were at the end of the room, with salads on the left and entrees on the right.

She spooned small portions of the various salads onto her plate, then

moved to the entrees. A woman standing behind the table told her, in Spanish, that she was allowed only one plate. She realized she'd spread the salads over half the plate, so she used her fork to push them together, leaving room for the entrees.

She went to the table where Alex sat flanked by Cathi and Barb, with Dorothy and the others across the table. Lynn sat down next to Cathi. Alex was in full “guide mode.” Lynn had gotten used to having him sit next to her, to translate and provide information and explanations. Her feelings, seeing him completely engrossed in conversation with the others, surprised her. She felt neglect—almost jealousy, even though

she'd never been a jealous person. So, she took a deep breath and tried to dismiss what she considered an utterly inappropriate response to their guide paying equal attention to the others. He wasn't only her guide on this tour. He was everyone's guide. Still, with the chairs so close together, if they'd sat next to each other, their knees might've touched. She realized suddenly that the restaurant was rather warm.

She focused on the food, which was quite good and different from what she'd expected. In temperature, everything was about the same—neither hot nor cold. The flavors blended so well, she often couldn't tell the difference between something new and

what she'd tasted before. She'd have to admit that she'd expected unique flavors, but almost everything had a sauce. Some of the meats had no sauce, but they weren't plain, either. Some looked like they'd been barbecued, while others were roasted. Nothing seemed to be fried, but could've been beneath the sauces. She enjoyed getting to make comparisons between Peruvian food and what she was used to eating in Virginia.

She had a Pisco Sour with her meal, while a couple of the ladies had opted for Inka Cola, which was yellow instead of brown, like colas at home. Sharon offered her a taste. It was exceptionally sweet, almost syrupy. She noticed that Alex was drinking Inka

Cola, too.

While she was looking at him, he turned and winked at her! Instead of blushing and turning away, which seemed silly for a woman her age, she raised her glass to him in a toast. He did the same, and they sipped their drinks still looking at each other. Then he turned away to answer another question from Dorothy and Barb.

Lynn's feelings of jealousy evaporated completely. She'd have to remember that she was one of the group from now on. The next time he smiled at her, she nodded to let him know she understood.

Sharon nudged her. "Look at those dancers!"

Entertainment provided by musicians and dancers from the coast, then from the highlands, included vigorous music. Shouting from the dancers and diners continued to drown all attempts at conversation. The dance that drew the most laughter and shouting came at the end of the performance. The women attached a cloth “tail” to the backs of their short skirts that stood out over crinolines, then did a Peruvian version of the hula, circling their hips while the men, with lighted candles, tried to set the tails on fire. Only a couple of the men succeeded. The dancers pulled diners onto the stage to participate—women and men—which produced even more laughter from on that

side of the large room.

One of the men stepped down from the stage and took Lynn's hand, leading her back on stage where one of the women attached her "tail." Alex immediately followed her and accepted a lighted candle from one of the other men. At first, they had different partners. By the time they were paired, Lynn was laughing and doing her best not to let her "tail" be burned. Alex tried to hold the candle under the end of the cloth, but Lynn always managed to maneuver it away. When the song ended, all the women stood still and allowed their "tails" to be burned, including Lynn. Hugs followed, along with shouting and laughter and happy tears.

Alex helped Lynn down from the stage, then picked her up and twirled her around. Cheers erupted all over the restaurant. Almost everyone in their group had another Pisco Sour, which Lynn loved, since it gave her a light feeling that helped to banish any thoughts other than enjoying the evening.

By the time they left the restaurant, Lynn's ears were ringing. Lively conversation on the way back to the hotel was the perfect end to the day. By the time they got off the bus, Lynn was about to collapse. She begged off sitting in the lobby to talk and went straight to their room. She had to get some sleep! They had to be up early in the morning, again, for another day of touring,

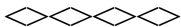
beginning with the pyramids of Caral, where Alex promised there was sunshine to lift her spirits and make the day truly special. So far, her mental image of Peru hadn't matched what they'd seen in Lima, and she was ready for that image to come to life.

Sharon stayed in the lobby with the others, still full of energy and thrilled to have time to ask Alex all the questions she wanted to ask. Have you always lived in Cusco? How old are you? And the biggie. Are you married? Surely you have a girlfriend? If not, then why not? Would you like to have a girlfriend?

Lynn would undoubtedly hear all the answers in the morning. She planned on being in bed before Sharon returned

to the room and had made her promise to come in quietly.

She hardly had time to recount the day before she fell asleep.



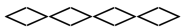
Alex patiently answered all of Sharon's questions, which he'd answered many times before on previous tours. Then, he excused himself. "It's been a long day. I have to have my beauty rest so I'll be able to regale you with fun and interesting facts tomorrow about Caral, where you will see pyramids older than the ones on the Giza Plateau in Egypt. Good night to all of you. It's been a pleasure. I promise you will enjoy our trip to Caral in the morning. There will be sunshine!"

The ladies wished him a good night's sleep. When he got to the elevator, he wondered if Lynn might still be awake. He'd have to make sure they sat together tomorrow at lunch in Barranca.

Peru's national day of celebration was approaching. In one more day, he and his group would be in Cusco, where they would enjoy fireworks and dancing at the festivities honoring the Peruvian Day of Independence from Spanish rule. That day, they'd have lunch at the *Incanto* Restaurant, overlooking the Plaza de Armas where the festivities would be centered. He definitely looked forward to that time.

When Alex got back to his room

that night, he realized he was more tired than he thought. He looked forward to tomorrow morning, when they'd drive out of the fog of Lima, into the sunshine of Caral. More than anything, he hoped sunshine would lift Lynn's spirits. Whatever she'd heard on the phone had not been good news. He could tell by her expression. He couldn't wait to see her smile again.



Lynn woke up the next morning feeling better than the previous morning, but still not completely rested, thanks to lying awake for an hour after she'd turned out her light last night, leaving the bathroom light on for Sharon. Barb had planned their itinerary to include some

time off in Cusco, so they could wander through the plazas and the market on their own. She couldn't wait to get there.

This morning's destination excited her, too. If anything could distract her from what was going on at home, it was Caral. She'd taught her students about the wonders of Caral with its eight ancient pyramids and three sunken plazas. Alex was correct. They were older than the pyramids of Khufu, Khafre, and Menkaure on the Giza Plateau. Only, the pyramids at Caral weren't built of limestone. They were built from mud, grass, and stones. Some of the pyramids, according to what she'd read and the photographs she'd seen, had almost worn away, but the Great

Pyramid—*El Pyramide Mayor*—was still standing. Seeing the place she'd taught students to marvel about would truly be a treat—and the perfect distraction.

The altitude at Caral was about 1,100 feet. For the first time since they'd left Virginia, Lynn felt excited and eager for the day's tour!

Sharon was still asleep, so their order in the bathroom was reversed this morning. By the time Lynn emerged, Sharon was sitting on the side of the bed making groaning noises, rubbing her face and tousling her hair.

"I never should've had that third Pisco Sour." She made her way into the bathroom.

“Don’t take too long!” Lynn told her. “I’ll be downstairs having breakfast.”

“Stick a bagel in your purse for me.”

Lynn headed for the elevator and was pleasantly surprised to see Alex there, waiting for the next car.

“*Buenos días, Señorita.* I hope you slept well.”

“*Buenos días, Señor.* I did, thank you. I’m excited about going to Caral this morning.”

“Sunshine!”

“Yes. I can’t wait!”

The elevator doors opened, and he motioned for her to precede him into the car. It moved slowly, compared with

elevators she was used to using in Virginia.

“I hope all is well at your home in Virginia.”

“That was my father on the phone last night. He and Mom live in New Mexico—a very long way from Virginia. But yes. Everything is fine.”

He went on to the highlight of the day’s tour. “Are you familiar with Caral?”

“Yes. I teach World History. I’ve taught my students about Caral and shown them photos, but actually being there and taking photos of my own will make that study even more meaningful when I get home. It’s hard to imagine pyramids in Peru being older than those

at Giza.”

“Have you been to Egypt?”

“No, but I’ve read about them and I’ve seen television programs about them that bring them to life. I hope to see them in person someday. But I’m not going inside the Great Pyramid.”

“Why not?”

“I’m sometimes claustrophobic. It’s hot in the narrow tunnels leading to Khufu’s burial chamber, and people go in and out through that same tunnel. A friend of mine told me I’d never make it. He isn’t claustrophobic at all, but by the time he emerged from that tunnel, he was gasping for breath and vowed he’d never do it again. I’m content to watch others make that expedition on television!”

“We won’t be going inside the pyramids at Caral.”

“That’s a relief! I’d have to wait outside!”

The car opened on the ground floor. The restaurant was just to the left. They found the others at two tables pulled together. Alex suggested sitting at a third table so there would be a chair for Sharon when she came down. Lynn started to protest, knowing Sharon wouldn’t be down until the last possible minute, but with her new goal of learning everything she could from this guide, she agreed with a smile and was pleased when Alex pulled out a chair for her.

“They have a nice buffet, with omelets made the way you prefer, or you

can order from the menu.”

“The buffet will be fine.”

“For me, as well.”

When the waiter came to take their drink orders, Lynn ordered hot tea. He told her there were tea bags on the buffet next to the hot water.

“You’ll want to try Coca tea once we get to Cusco. It will give you energy at the much higher altitude,” Alex suggested.

“I read that Cusco sits at 11,000 feet. Should we be having Coca tea now, before we leave the coastal area?”

“It isn’t necessary. Coca tea helps those who stay in Cusco for several days. The altitude usually affects them at night. Lying flat makes it harder to

breathe and to get blood to the brain.”

“I’ll have to remember to use several pillows!”

They went to the buffet. Lynn was surprised to find vegetables as well as fruits there, plus sweet breads, and a chef waiting to take orders for omelets. That’s what she wanted. She asked him for ham, cheese, peppers, and tomatoes. While the omelet was cooking, she remembered a warning in her guide book about not eating fresh fruit and vegetables in Peru unless they were peeled and properly cleaned. This was a really nice hotel, so she didn’t worry about her omelet being anything but safe to eat.

While the omelet cooked, she

selected a cup, filled it with hot water, then added a tea bag. In Cusco, she'd definitely try the Coca tea.

Her omelet was ready. Alex had filled his plate with vegetables and fruits and added a sweet roll. They went back to their table. While they exchanged information and thoughts about Caral and what they'd see there this morning, he glanced at his cell phone several times.

The third time, he said, "Will you excuse me, please? I have to make sure the hotel has everyone checked out."

"I'll be finished in a minute."

Lynn watched him leave the restaurant. He was dressed simply, in jeans and a black sweatshirt. His white hat lay on his back, the cord around his

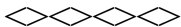
neck, revealing black, curly hair. He was quite handsome. When she turned back, she saw the others smiling at her.

“Did you have coffee or tea?” she asked them.

“Tea!”

“Coffee!”

They held up their cups. Sharon lifted hers as a salute, which made Lynn blush again. She had to stop blushing! There was absolutely nothing to blush about!



Lynn insisted on getting on the bus without help when they boarded for Caral. Alex’s smile included some amusement this time. He was obviously pleased that she was feeling more rested

and eager to explore the Caral ruins. In sunshine!

They went miles and miles within Lima. Lynn was used to driving in big cities, but she'd never driven in one this big—and never would! More than eight million people lived in the Lima Province.

They were still under cloud cover and engulfed in fog, with the temperature in the low 60s, just as it had been yesterday. They passed hundreds of small, poorly constructed houses on the hillsides that looked as if a strong wind would send them sliding down to the road. Most had sheets of cloth covering the windows. Crumbling roofs and walls often went unrepaired. On some roofs,

clotheslines had been strung with clothes hanging there to dry, collecting the dirt and exhaust that covered everything in the city. Stray dogs wandered everywhere, but very few people were evident. Lynn assumed most of the people were at work, and the children in school. How crowded would all these houses be after work hours? She could see from remnants of paint that the buildings had once been painted bright colors, but it was obvious the paint had worn really thin in the foggy winter climate.

After an hour and a half, the bus stopped for a restroom break. The restrooms weren't in a business, though. They were in a low, worn building of

their own, with a man standing guard over the entrances. Alex paid the man so they could use the facilities. Lynn had read that tourists should bring tissue with them because the bathrooms might not have any.

Back on the bus, Lynn whispered to Sharon, “That’s the first time I’ve seen toilets without seats!”

“Me, too. Remind me to re-stock my purse with tissue!”

As they got closer to Caral, they began to see patches of green that looked like moss. Lynn took a deep breath and realized what a relief it was to see something other than brown. Vegetation increased the farther they traveled from the city. Eventually, they were driving

past cultivated fields in valleys, surrounded by desert-like terrain. A river ran down the center of the valley, providing water for crops, but only for a short distance into the dry land beyond. They also passed chicken farms with adobe fences, then barreled up a road that was so rough they bounced in their seats! It was impossible to take pictures through the windows because of the speed of the bus and the bouncing they did over the ruts in the dirt roads. But a miracle had occurred! They'd climbed out of the fog. Sunshine at last!

Chapter 7

Closer to Caral, Lynn saw a man walking in a field that seemed to be planted with two different crops. There were cows on one side of the dividing line, but not on the other side. The man had a long stick in his hand, which he waved at any of the cows that turned as though intending to cross the line. She wondered if he walked back and forth all day long, keeping the cows out of the other crop? They passed so quickly, she didn't have time to ask Alex, who was talking about something else on the other side of the bus.

Lynn realized she'd "woken up" from her slump and actually felt like smiling again, without having to encourage herself to do it. The bus parked near some buildings that looked like a long, curved market, but there were almost no vendors. Only a few people had opened their shops for tourists today, and they got the full attention of the group.

Sharon bought a canvas vest with a Caral logo patch on one side. Vicki, Sheila, and the others looked at t-shirts, jewelry, and other souvenirs. Lynn wasn't interested in buying anything here. She wanted to save her money for Cusco and Machu Picchu. Right now, she just wanted to see the pyramids.

Within ten minutes, Alex was waving to everyone to gather so the tour could begin.

Alex escorted them through the ruins, pointing out each of the eight pyramids and describing what archaeologists had determined was most likely their function in the city. There were three round, sunken plazas where Lynn pictured vendors and buyers gathered. Three thousand years ago, the city of Caral had been home to thousands of people. Being there was a heady experience.

Lynn basked in the strong sunshine, turning slowly, trying to imagine what it had been like to live in Caral when the pyramids were being

built. The majestic peaks of the Andes gave the city a majesty she could feel

The pyramids of Caral had been dated to 3000 BCE. Some of the Caral pyramids had crumbled while others still remained fairly intact. According to Alex, the largest pyramid covered an area the size of four American football fields! It stood today as a sentinel for the great city. Surrounded by mountains, Lynn realized it must have felt like living in heaven.

She closed her eyes, picturing people among the pyramids, laughing, talking, loving their home. When she opened her eyes, Alex stood nearby, watching her.

“What are you thinking?” he

asked.

“How wonderful it must have been to live here.”

He nodded. “I have thought the same thing, many times. These pyramids had special meaning for the people who lived here. They were built as part of their religion. What better place to honor the Great Spirit than on a wide mesa surrounded by mountains?”

She had to agree.

After completing the tour, they headed for the bus. Lynn had chosen a blue knit top with a scooped neckline this morning. The back of her neck felt hot.

Sharon came up behind her.

“Don’t scratch! You got your wish

today! You've gotten some sun and it's glowing bright red on your pale skin!"

Lynn hadn't scratched—just rubbed her neck—but the stinging pain of sunburn was unmistakable.

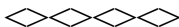
"Who would've thought, after all that fog, that I'd end up with a sunburn today?" She thought about it a few seconds. "I love it!"

Back on the bus, Lynn settled into the seat with a sigh of contentment. She couldn't wait to describe to her students what it had meant to her to be at Caral. She realized, looking between the seats, that Alex was smiling at her again. This time, his smile conveyed contentment as well as happiness. He'd succeeded by taking her to a place she loved—exactly

what an excellent guide was hired to do. She'd have to tell him at lunch how much she appreciated his knowledge of Peru's special places, and his willingness to devote his life to sharing that knowledge with others.

Alex had an announcement that seemed to make him really happy. "We have reservations at a special restaurant on the coast for lunch today. They won a contest for the best *ceviche*!"

Lynn saw how excited Alex was about getting to have "the best *ceviche*." He really loved this national dish!



They arrived at the restaurant at 2:00. The sign out front displayed the boast along with the name of the owner

—Fernando Davila. *Jota Resobar Barranca* was right on the beach of the Pacific Ocean, and socked in with 100% cloud cover, like Lima.

Inside, they sat at a long wooden table with wooden chairs. A television mounted in the corner of the room hung out from the wall, almost over one end of the table. A television spot featuring the restaurant and its designation of “best *ceviche*” played over and over in an endless loop. Lynn wished the volume could be turned down, but Fernando Davila came out to greet them—and turned up the volume. To make sure they watched the part where he was featured, he pointed at the screen, nodding and mumbling something about

what an honor it had been to win the contest.

Lynn sat near the far end of the table on the side next to the wall so she could see the ocean through the front windows. The menu, as before at the Larco Restaurant, listed foods that had been approved for the tour. *Ceviche* was first in the list, of course, and it was no surprise when Alex ordered it. Lynn chose the fried seafood. They also had Coca Cola, Sprite, beer, and, of course, Pisco Sours. Lynn ordered a Coke with ice. That was another thing she'd learned from the guide book. Soft drinks were served cold, but not with ice unless the customer requested it. Several others asked for Coke or Sprite—with

ice.

The food was delicious—and plentiful! Alex's plate was piled high with *ceviche*, just as Lynn's plate was filled with seafood—shrimp, fish, and oysters—and fried sweet potatoes. Incredible! Once again, Alex had chosen the chair adjacent to Lynn's. They tried to talk about Caral while they ate, but the television drowned all attempts at conversation. When Fernando went back into the kitchen, Alex turned the volume down so they wouldn't have to talk over it.

After lunch, they walked on the beach for a few minutes before boarding the bus again. Alex strolled close to Lynn. When his hand brushed hers, she

stepped closer to him so it would happen again. The next time, he took her hand and didn't let go.

On the way back to the hotel, they got stuck in traffic for an extra hour. People had swarmed into the city by the thousands for the festival planned for Saturday. It seemed the celebration had already begun. By the time they finally reached the hotel, they were ready for some rest before a late dinner at the hotel restaurant, on their own.

After collapsing on their beds for half an hour, Lynn and Sharon went down to the restaurant and sat with Cathi, Barb, Vicki, Dorothy, BJ and Sheila, who were already there, looking at menus.



Alex had seen the ladies come out of the elevator and go into the restaurant, followed soon after by Lynn and Sharon. He started to get up to join them.

The driver's quiet laughter caught his attention. "It would seem that you like one of the *turistas* more than the others."

"Why would you say that?"

He only smiled and went to the bar to order another drink.

The remark bothered him until he realized it was true. Alex had to be more careful to pay attention to each of the lovely ladies in the group, and not only to Lynn. He didn't want to be accused of favoritism again, by anyone. He headed

for the elevator and went up to his room.



They were up early again the next morning for breakfast, then went straight to the airport for their flight to Cusco. It took more than an hour to get there because of the traffic.

They checked in with Peruvian Airlines this time. The procedure was easy, thanks to Alex's tour documentation, with all their names and flight reservations. They had to provide their passports again, just as they had at customs the first night, then at the hotel in Lima. No one ever asked to see a driver's license, which made sense. Passports were the primary identification for tourists. Per the guide

book's recommendation, Lynn and Sharon had copied the pages of their passports and carried those copies in a separate place from their passports, just in case that valuable piece of ID should be lost.

The flight took an hour and a half. Since they were flying above the clouds, and since Lynn sat by a window, she was able to glimpse the grandeur of the Andes through the clouds from time to time. She had seen beautiful mountains in the US, but the Andes were grand in a completely different way. They weren't as rugged, at least for the most part, and the huge mountains in the range seemed smoother and more uniform in shape and size than the Rockies. They also seemed

to soar straight up from the valleys below instead of spreading out at the bottom into foothills, as the Rockies did.

About halfway through the flight, Sharon got up to go to the restroom. As soon as she'd left, Alex moved into her seat next to Lynn.

"They're beautiful, aren't they?" he asked, leaning closer to her to see the mountains out the window.

"Incredible."

Without looking directly at her, Alex picked up Lynn's hand and laced his fingers with hers. "It is an honor to share my beautiful country with you, Sunshine."

She gave him a puzzled look.

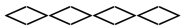
"It is a perfect name for you. Your

hair, your eyes, your personality all shine like the sun. Thank you for coming to Peru.” He kissed her hand.

She still didn’t know what to say.

Sharon got back about then. Alex stood and stepped back to make room for her to sit down. “I can’t stop being a guide for even one flight.” He went back to his seat.

Lynn could tell from Sharon’s smile that she’d seen them holding hands, but she didn’t say anything. Lynn was glad. She gazed out the window again, and could still feel Alex’s hand holding hers.



In Cusco, they left the airport and stepped into brilliant sunshine among

buildings painted in a rainbow of colors, with people everywhere, dressed in colorful clothing and costumes. With the festival only a few days away, everyone had gotten totally into the spirit of celebration, with music, laughter, and happiness evident everywhere they looked.

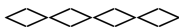
Lynn breathed a sigh of relief. This was the Peru she'd come to see! Everything about Cusco matched the photographs she'd seen, and her impressions of what being in Peru really meant.

Alex welcomed them to Cusco—his home. “You’ll notice that every building has a red tile roof. There is a law that requires all the roofs in Cusco

to be red tile, because it enhances the beauty of the city.”

The bus they’d be using in Cusco was much larger and more comfortable than the one in Lima. There was no need for anyone to sit next to anyone else. They all sat next to the windows to give them an excellent view.

One of the first things Lynn noticed was the traffic. It wasn’t nearly as congested or frantic as Lima’s traffic had been. Thank goodness! They had a new driver who smiled more than the one in Lima. Alex introduced him as Rudolfo. He seemed a lot more relaxed than the driver they’d had in Lima, and that was completely understandable.



After lunch, they wandered through the crowd, looking into shop windows the best they could with hundreds of people gathered for the celebration.

Lynn stopped suddenly. “Oh! I almost stepped on him!” An old dark brown dog, gray around the muzzle, obviously well-fed, lay sprawled on the ground. His eyes opened, then fluttered closed again after hearing Lynn’s exclamation. “Who does he belong to?”

Alex pushed his way to where she was standing. “He belongs to everyone. He’s a stray, without a family, so everyone becomes his family and takes care of him.”

“That’s wonderful!” She wanted

to pet the dog but thought better of it. He was sleeping peacefully, even in the midst of the chaos of music and happy people laughing and chattering. He clearly wasn't disturbed by the crowd noise.

“If you'd gone with us to the top of the pyramid at Pachacamac, you would've seen dogs there, too. They live at the top, where there is no food or water for them. But those who work at the site take food and water to them, and put sweaters on them to keep them warm in the winter. Peruvians love their dogs.”

“Do they have names?”

“Yes. They all have the same name—*Perro*. ”

Everyone laughed. Lynn gave Alex a happy smile, and he returned it. She noticed, though, that his smile vanished when he turned away to look for something else he could point out to the group.

So it had come to that. Sharon had told her everyone knew about their attraction to each other, but Alex didn't know that they knew. That was probably best.

After weaving their way through the much calmer traffic in Cusco, they came to the hotel, *Costa del Sol Picoaga*, which had a completely different look and character from the *Casa Andina* in Lima. A couple of young boys waved from where they stood in a

parking space just past the hotel entrance. Alex tipped both of them after they took the space. Two young women sat near the entrance, holding cards covered with cloth, with what looked like pendants pinned to the fabric. There were dozens of designs. Most of them were silver.

“Miss, you want to buy? Fifty *soles*! Thirty *soles*! Two for forty *soles*!”

Lynn declined each offer and followed the others inside. Rudolfo and employees of the hotel busily unloaded their luggage.

Inside, they gathered in a small area with couches near the front desk. A table against one wall had a carafe of

hot water and a large bowl of dried green leaves. Alex suggested they fix a cup of Coca tea, “to help with the altitude.”

Lynn picked up three leaves for her cup. Alex reached across her to the bowl, picked up half a dozen more and added them to her cup then filled her cup with hot water. Packets of natural sugar filled another bowl. Lynn added one packet to her cup and stirred. She sipped carefully, intrigued by the flavor. It had an earthy green taste she liked a lot.

“Gracias, Señor.”

“De nada. Cusco is above 11,000 feet elevation. The people here drink Coca tea or chew the leaves to help them breathe the thin air. While you’re here,

you'll need to drink two or three cups a day so you won't have awful headaches."

As far as Lynn could see, they all enjoyed the tea. A doorway led outside to the center of the hotel—a large courtyard, paved with bricks. Grass grew between the bricks, and to her delight a dusty-colored lamb wandered around, eating the grass. In the center stood an incredibly beautiful stone fountain, filled with red, yellow, orange and purple flowers. Water cascaded from the top and over the plants, keeping them well-watered.

Lynn looked up at the second floor, then turned all the way around. Open walkways with beautifully

sculpted columns circled the courtyard, creating a classic Spanish home. Off to the right a wide stone staircase led to the second floor. The rooms opened onto the walkways on both levels. This hotel met all of Lynn's expectations of Cusco.

She realized Alex was standing just behind her. She turned her head just enough to let him know she was aware of his presence. He took it as an invitation to move closer. He walked around in front of her, watching the door behind them, then reached for her hand, squeezing her fingers gently. "Do you like the hotel?"

"I love it. I know the rooms will be just as beautiful."

"They are. Be sure to ask for a

room at the back. Otherwise, the street noise and traffic will keep you awake tonight. During the festival, people stay up all night, celebrating, and drinking more than they should.”

“Thanks. I’d better do that now.”

He glanced toward the door to the lobby. “I think Sharon has your assigned room already.”

Sharon came out with keys in her hand. “Our room is right above the lobby!” She pointed over her head. “We’ll be able to see what’s going on in the street!”

Lynn laughed at her friend. “That won’t work. There’s going to be a lot of traffic tonight, and people on the streets won’t worry about waking anyone. We

need a room on the back if they have one available.”

“Oh. Okay. I’ll see if they have another one that’ll be quieter.” She hesitated. “How did you know that?”

“Our guide told me.” She raised their clasped hands.

Sharon grinned a lot more than she should have, Lynn thought, but somehow it was okay.

“Great guide!” Sharon gave her a thumbs-up on her way back to the front desk.

“She knows,” Lynn whispered.

“Is it a problem that you and I have become special friends?”

“No! Of course not,” she said too quickly. She didn’t know how else to

answer him. The attraction between them—especially his attraction to her—had been a complete surprise. She still hadn't decided how she felt about it, other than pleased and flattered. Part of her wanted to explore these unexpected feelings, while another part of her insisted it was an impossible situation. How could two people who lived so far apart ever be able to make a relationship work?

Chapter 8

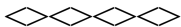
After they'd been assigned a different room, Alex watched Lynn and Sharon going up the stairs and around the walkway to the back of the hotel. They were in the back corner, where their sleep would hopefully be undisturbed.

How could he have been so impulsive, holding her hand at the Larco, then on the plane, then again in the courtyard? Each time, he'd done it almost without thinking, without remembering she was part of a group, a *turista*. His letting her know that his feelings went beyond those for a typical

turista was completely inappropriate. Yet, it seemed she'd acted impulsively, too. She didn't seem to be embarrassed, exactly, when he'd asked about their "special friendship." Only thoughtful, as though she weren't sure about her feelings. His feelings, though, were becoming more clear to him all the time. She didn't feel like only a friend. He knew what was happening, in spite of having known her only these few precious days.

He had to remember that he was, in essence, their employee, hired to make their visit to Peru memorable. Lynn was only a *turista*, nothing more. How could he have forgotten that? There would be no taking any of it back, but

maybe he could keep reminding himself that she lived half the world away. He could never leave Cusco. It was his home! He'd dedicated his life to learning everything he could about Peru and how this country had grown from the land of the pre-Inca to the country it was today—thanks primarily to *turistas*. Peru would always be home to him. He suspected Lynn felt the same way about her country, and Virginia. It was time for him to return to reality.



In the room, which was as lovely as Lynn could've hoped, she said very little, embarrassed that Sharon had observed both times Alex had taken her hand. It was one thing to be impulsive

and enjoy the attentions of this handsome Peruvian. It was quite another to allow her emotions to run wild and open her heart to him.

After they'd unpacked some of their things, Sharon stood in the middle of the room and stared at her.

Lynn knew what was coming.
“Just say it.”

“I'm proud of you!”

“Proud? What are you talking about? I've lost my mind!”

“I disagree, my friend. You may have found your mind for the first time in two years! No, make that four years. Bill was never right for you. He didn't have the personality, the drive, the fire that you have. At least, you had it before you

met him. I haven't seen it much lately. Now, you've met Alex—someone who has all those qualities—and you aren't hesitating! I'm proud of you for going with your heart instead of analyzing everything to death, then backing away! Alex is wonderful! He's handsome, intelligent, and he's a history teacher!"

Lynn released a huge sigh. "But it's impossible! He lives in Peru. I live in Virginia. End of story!"

"Where there's love, there's a way."

"Love? Hardly. Attraction, yes."

"Love begins with attraction, but not just physical attraction. Why are you making me tell you all this? You know as well as I do that love never analyzes

before blooming in your heart like those gorgeous flowers downstairs in the fountain! Love won't grow if there isn't more than physical attraction. Alex has depth! He loves taking tourists all over his country, and I'll bet he's a great kisser, too."

"Now you're sounding like a soap opera. I like Alex. A lot! But that doesn't mean I love him. We've known each other less than a week! I couldn't possibly fall in love in only a week. And neither could he."

"See? See! I knew it! The thought has already occurred to you, too!" Sharon hugged her friend. "Just don't get in the way of your feelings, okay? Explore them a little. Take this

handsome Peruvian for a spin! And don't forget Cher's advice."

"Cher?"

She sang, "If you wanna know if he loves you so..."

"Enough! I held his hand! Big deal!"

"Three times. He reached for your hand on the plane and in the courtyard, but you didn't pull away, the way you did at the Larco."

"You saw that too, huh?"

"Sweetie, I see everything that happens to you. I've prayed for this day! I've seen how he looks at you! This could be your chance for something incredible. Not just a fling!"

Lynn sat down on the bed and put

one hand over her eyes. “Why did I have to meet him here? Why couldn’t he at least live at least in the same country?”

“Just because you live in different countries right now doesn’t mean it always has to be that way.”

“Right. Just pack up and move to Peru.”

“Or, pack up and move to Virginia.”

“What would he do in Virginia?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Teach Peruvian history maybe?”

Lynn glanced at the clock by the bed. “We still have some time off before going to the Museo del Pisco tonight.”

“That’s so we can get used to being at more than 11,000 feet.”

“I don’t want to spend our free time in this room. I want to walk down to that little plaza. It’s only a couple of blocks, right?”

“I’ll go with you. I want to check out some of the shops. Vicki saw a quilt in a display that she wants to look at, and Dorothy mentioned taking photos for Tony to paint when she gets home. Not sure what the others have in mind but I’m betting it will include spending money.”

“So, let’s go! I just want to sit on a bench and watch people go by. I want to enjoy being in Cusco.”

They met the others in the lobby and set out for the plaza. The two ladies were still camped out right outside the

entrance to the hotel, begging them to buy their silver pendants. One of them hurried over to Lynn the minute she stepped onto the sidewalk. "Please, buy from me! I will make you a good price!"

Lynn told them, "Later. I'll buy something from each of you later."

"We'll be right here! Don't forget!"

Sharon leaned closer. "How could you forget?"

At the plaza, the group divided into pairs and headed in different directions. Everyone except Lynn wanted to shop. She wanted to relax and soak up some heavenly Cusco sunshine.

She selected a bench close to one of the flower gardens. Peruvians

obviously loved flowers. They'd seen flower gardens even in Lima, where there didn't seem to be enough sunshine to grow them. Yet, they'd adjusted to the low light. Here in Cusco, flowers grew everywhere and flourished, lending their subtle fragrances to the thin air.

Conversations drifted from group to group all over the plaza, including some couples who had their arms around each other or held hands. Everyone looked happy. She didn't hear anyone arguing, and she didn't even hear any babies crying or children quarreling. They ran and played, laughing and happy to be in the plaza. There didn't seem to be much concern about children wandering farther than six feet away from their

parents. Cusco was truly a completely different atmosphere from a metropolitan area in the US—or the gloom of Lima.

She saw several dogs wandering through the plaza. Two of them flopped down to sun themselves and sleep. Lynn decided they had the perfect idea. She leaned back and closed her eyes for a few moments. When she realized she was in a shadow she opened her eyes. Alex.

“You look contented.”

“Are you still on duty? What can you tell me about this plaza?”

“No, I’m not on duty. I have some time off, too, before we go to the Pisco tasting. But I can tell you about the plaza if you wish.”

“Tell me about the *Museo*.”

“The *Museo del Pisco* has dozens of flavors of Pisco, made in different ways. You’ll learn how to make a basic Pisco Sour, and you’ll get to try some of the flavored Piscos.”

“Sounds yummy. Will I be able to walk back to the hotel tonight after all the tasting?”

He laughed, sat beside her, and reached for her hand. “I will make sure you get there safely.”

She had no doubt about that.

“Want to take a walk?”

“Of course. Which way do you want to go?”

“Doesn’t matter. I just want to see all the flowers.”

They wandered hand in hand except when Lynn stopped to take pictures. Alex asked a woman walking behind them if she would take their picture together in front of the flowers. Happily, she complied. Alex put his arm around Lynn and pulled her close to him. The woman took their photo with Lynn's camera, then with Alex's phone.

"Now I have a picture to remind me of you after you go home to Virginia."

"And I have one of you." Lynn found it difficult to smile, so she took his hand and they finished their circuit of the plaza. The bench where they'd sat before was still empty, so they sat there again.

Alex started to push Lynn's hair back from her face, so he could see her better, then thought better of it. "You seemed upset earlier, when you got the phone call."

"Yes, I was. My mother is ill. She might have a disease that takes away her memories and makes her forget important things."

"Alzheimer's."

She nodded.

"My uncle had this awful disease." Alex stared across the plaza at an old man sitting on a bench, surrounded by several children who chattered at the same time. "That man reminds me of him. He never had children of his own, but he loved his

nieces and nephews more than life itself. When the disease took him, he forgot their names, then their faces. Very sad.”

“I’ve never met anyone who hasn’t had a parent, a brother or sister, aunt or uncle, or a friend who had Alzheimer’s.”

“Neither have I. It is tragic when someone you love forgets who you are.”

Lynn had to take a deep breath with that thought.

“I’m sorry. I made you sad.”

“My mother hasn’t been diagnosed yet, so I hadn’t really thought about her forgetting me someday. But if that’s what it is, I know she will.”

“Will you have to go home early?”

“No, my father is taking care of her. He called to let me know he’s

decided not to work any longer so he can stay home with her.”

“Your father is a good man.”

“Yes, he is, but my mother is beginning to forget that, from time to time.” She told him what had happened the day before.

Tears came to his eyes. “*Tío* Roberto did the same thing with my mother—his sister. She took him some fresh tortillas one day and he tried to pay her for them. He didn’t recognize her.”

Impulsively, Lynn hugged him. Every day she found something new that they shared.

Sharon called to them. She and the others approached carrying bags and packages from their shopping spree.

“Hey, you two! You missed some great buys!”

Alex stood to make room for some of the ladies on the bench. Cathi, Sheila, and Sharon plopped down beside Lynn. Vicki, Dorothy, and BJ were taking photos of flowers.

“I’m saving my money for the market at Machu Picchu,” Lynn said. “What did you buy?”

They took turns showing her tote bags, purses, shawls, t-shirts, and a poncho Barb had bought for her nephew who lived in New York. “He’ll love this when it snows six feet—once a week—this winter!”

“Vicki, did you buy that quilt?”

“No, but I took a picture of it after

I asked the shopkeeper if it was okay. It gave me some great ideas for a quilt I want to make to celebrate this tour!”

Lynn told Alex, “Vicki is an artist when it comes to making quilts. She has photos of a lot of them. You’ll have to get her to show them to you.”

“I would love to see them.”

“Barb is a librarian, and she and Sheila are teachers and writers. Dorothy’s husband, Tony, is an artist. He’ll be painting Cusco for months to come, thanks to Dorothy’s busy camera! She’s a writer, too, and so is Cathi.”

Cathi was writing frantically in her notebook. Lynn gestured toward her and told him, “I don’t think there’s any doubt where Cathi’s next story will be

set.”

Cathi scribbled one more sentence then gave Alex a wide grin. “Want to be in my book?”

“Of course! I can be the tour guide!”

“That’s the idea! Want to be the hero?”

“The hero? But I haven’t done anything heroic!”

“Cathi writes romantic stories, with a hero and a heroine—a man and a woman—falling in love.”

Alex nodded. “I definitely want to be the hero in your book. Will I get to kiss the heroine?”

“Of course! Let’s see now. What if Lynn were to be the heroine? Would that

be all right with you?"

"Of course."

Lynn felt her cheeks blushing.

Alex's cheeks were a bit red, too. "Cathi ____"

"Time to get back to the hotel!"

Cathi closed her notebook and led the way across the plaza. The others followed, leaving Lynn and Alex blushing by the bench.

Alex whispered, "I'm sorry if I embarrassed you."

Lynn shook her head. "It wasn't your doing. I'll have to have a talk with Cathi." Her smile told him she'd been amused by Cathi's "plotting."

They caught up with the others, who cast happy glances back at Lynn.

When Sharon flashed her traditional sappy smile, Lynn narrowed her eyes at her friend, but had to smile back. She'd been right. Everyone knew they'd become "special friends." But even Sharon didn't know how special Alex had become to Lynn.

Back at the hotel, Sharon asked Alex, "Do we need to dress up tonight?"

"If you want to. Cusco is very casual, though. Wear whatever is comfortable."

"Will there be dancers tonight?" Barb asked.

"Only loud music." Alex told them about the Pisco tasting and making the Sours.

"Uh, Alex," Sharon said. "I read

somewhere that when coming to high altitude it's best not to drink too much until you're used to the thinner air."

"That's true."

"So why are we going to a drinking party our first night in Cusco?"

He looked sheepish. "You'd have to ask Andrew about that."

Barb perked up. "Andrew?"

"He planned your tour."

"Will he be there tonight?"

"Absolutely. He never misses a tasting party. He's from England. He came to Cusco on vacation and loved it so much more than the rainy part of England where he was from that he stayed here, bought a house, and started a touring company. It's thanks to Andrew

that I've met you."

"We'll definitely have to thank him. I'd better get started," Sheila said. "I know I brought my face with me, but I'm afraid it's in the bottom of my suitcase. I may look a little lopsided tonight."

"We'll all look lopsided by the time we leave the Museo," Vicki told her.

Lynn told Alex good-bye then went with Sharon to their room. Inside, she lay down on the bed to catch her breath. "No elevator! At least it's only one flight. And there's no need to say anything!"

Sharon rummaged through her clothes. "I can't wait to see what flavors

of Pisco they have tonight.”

“Me, too. I hope they’re serving food along with the drinks.”

“Tapas. It’s in the itinerary.”

“After that late lunch, I won’t be hungry for another hour.”

“We’ll drink for an hour, then we’ll eat!”

Lynn rolled to one side. “You know what happens to people who drink at extreme altitude. Do you know what happens to me when I drink brandy? Put the two together—”

“I can’t wait to see it. Just promise me you won’t push him away. And don’t worry about the others knowing about your little fling. They already know.”

“Gee. You think? What gave you

the first clue? Cathi's hero named Alex, or her heroine named Lynn?"

"They're as happy for you as I am. Give yourself a chance, sweetie."

Lynn swiped some tears from one cheek. "Okay. We'll give this little fling a chance. But that's all it is. A vacation fling."

"That's the spirit. Now get dressed! Wear something sexy!"

"I didn't bring anything sexy."

"It won't matter what you wear. Alex will think you're beautiful."

"Enough already! We're late!"

Sharon disappeared into the bathroom to change. Lynn went through the clothes she'd brought and chose a hot pink knit top with "sparklies," as Sharon

called them—something she'd picked up from an animated movie with some sort of crazy crow—and her black jeans with matching “sparklies” on the back pockets. Might as well go for broke. The pink top had a matching sweater that would help tonight when it got cooler.

Lynn thought about checking e-mail, but decided she'd check it tonight, after they got back, or tomorrow. She knew her father would call if the situation were extreme. She wanted their first full day in Cusco to be carefree and fun. So far, it had met all of her expectations. Her mother's illness, whatever it turned out to be, was going to mess up her life beyond repair, no matter what her father had said. This

could be the last vacation Lynn could take for years. She'd know by the end of this tour if sprucing up her unit on Machu Picchu would be the ultimate result, or if it would be something much more complicated. And heartbreaking.

Chapter 9

They walked to the *Museo del Pisco*. Almost everyone had worn something more dressy than they'd worn during the day for touring, but they'd all chosen nice jeans. When Alex saw Lynn's hot pink top with the "sparklies," his eyes sparkled, too! Lynn reminded herself she couldn't have more than two Pisco Sours tonight.

They heard the music before they ever opened the front doors. The front room of the *Museo* was small and packed with people obviously having a wonderful time. A few tried to dance in

the small space, but most simply sat in small groups with food and drinks covering the tables.

A bald man, tall, lanky, holding a drink in one hand and flashing a huge smile, called to Alex from the top of a short flight of stairs on the left side of the room. “Alex! Up here!”

Alex directed them up the stairs to where the man waited with arms wide. He hugged each of them in turn, then directed them to a room at the top of the stairs. When Lynn got to the room, the others were finding stools around a tall bar in the corner. Off to the right were tables and a corner booth, with a door leading onto what looked like an open hallway. There was no one else in the

room, but that didn't mean the room was quiet. They could still hear music and conversation from downstairs. Alex closed the door after they were all inside, which made it possible to hear what the bartender—Sergio—told them about the different kinds of Pisco. Lynn sat close to the left end. Alex eased onto the stool next to her and leaned onto the bar, as interested in what the bartender was saying as though he were hearing it for the first time.

“Pisco is a type of brandy made from white grapes. Many people who come to Peru compare the taste to tequila, and a Pisco Sour to a Margarita. But you won't find Margaritas in Peru.”

“Why not?” Cathi asked him.

“Because they had a contest years ago to see which drink everyone liked best. The Pisco Sour won! Tonight, you’ll see why. Have you already had a Pisco Sour?”

That brought nods and smiles.

“I’ll bet you haven’t had Pisco in different flavors, though, have you?”

Lynn scanned the labels on bottles behind him on shelves. Cinnamon and strawberry caught her attention right away.

“Before trying the flavored Piscos, I’m going to let you try four different types of Pisco.” He placed four glasses in front of each of them, then reached for a bottle under the bar. He poured a small amount into the glasses closest to them,

then invited them to taste it.

Lynn recognized the taste immediately from the Pisco Sours she'd already sampled in Lima. Truly, the brandy tasted a lot like tequila, but it had a sharper flavor. She took small sips.

Sergio poured a second type of Pisco into their second glasses, then followed with the third and fourth.

Lynn didn't like the second one at all. It had a smoky taste. The third and fourth were equally different. Her favorite was definitely the first. Most of the group liked the first one best, too, but Dorothy and Sheila chose one of the others.

"Now, it is time for you to learn how to make a Peruvian Pisco Sour!"

Sergio announced. “There was also a contest between Chile and Peru to see who made the best Pisco Sours. Peru won!” He pulled several more bottles from under the bar then demonstrated step by step how to mix the drink.

First, he poured three ounces of Pisco (the first one, that everyone agreed was really good) into a martini shaker. Then, he added an ounce of “simple syrup” which was sugar and water, followed by an ounce of lime juice, and one egg white. Last, he added three ice cubes, clamped the top on the shaker, and shook it vigorously. With a sharp pop of the heel of his hand on the side of the shaker, he removed the lid then poured the mixture into a short glass.

The egg white had created a frothy foam on top. Into the center of the foam, he carefully added three drops of Angostura bitters.

“Who wants to taste it first?”

Barb raised one hand while taking the glass with the other. Her expression after sipping the drink said it all, but she said it anyway. “The best one I’ve had since we got to Peru!”

Instead of making more, Sergio surprised them. “Now, you are going to make your own Pisco Sours, using any of the Piscos we have on the bar, or on the wall behind me. Please come around in pairs, through the short little door that opens into the area behind the bar, and decide which kind you want to make.”

He pulled out a second shaker.

Dorothy and Cathi went first. They chose to make the classic Sours. Next, Sheila and Vicki chose flavored Piscos from the wall, followed by BJ and Barb.

By then, with each pair passing their creation down the bar for everyone to taste, Lynn didn't notice which flavors they were choosing. They were all delicious, and the Pisco was creating a marvelous whirl across her forehead and between her eyes.

The last to duck under the short door were Sharon and Lynn. Lynn went first.

Sharon bumped her head. "Not my fault! It's the Pisco!"

They were all laughing by this

time. Lynn got to choose the flavor for hers. “Strawberry.” Sharon had difficulty getting the top of her shaker off, but Lynn’s came off the first try. Everyone cheered. When she glanced at Alex, she wasn’t surprised to see him sitting quietly, sipping the last of the third Pisco to be passed around the bar, smiling with pleasure at the fun she was having. No, she corrected herself. At the fun they were all having.

Lynn tasted the strawberry Sour. Talk about delicious! She closed her eyes, savoring it, then reluctantly gave it up for the others to try. Sharon finally managed to get the top off her shaker and poured the frothy Sour into a glass, Lynn reached for it.

“Nope!” Sharon told her. “This one is mine.”

Sergio handed Lynn the bottle of strawberry Pisco so she could make another for herself.

“And this one will be mine!” she announced to boisterous cheers.

When the bar had been wiped clean and tips had been stuffed into a glass on the bar for Sergio, Andrew led the way down the stairs. The music seemed louder than when they’d come in, an hour before. Andrew kept going when he got to the front room, though, down a second flight of stairs into the basement. To the left was the kitchen. Around the corner from the staircase was a long C-shaped booth with a low

table in the center. They threaded their way around the table, until they'd filled the booth completely. It wasn't a surprise that Alex eased into the corner beside Lynn.

A new server appeared and introduced himself as Sergio.

Dorothy frowned. "But the bartender upstairs—"

"—was Sergio. I am Sergio, too."

Lynn was really glad Dorothy had asked! Thanks to the whirling in her head, she thought she might have gotten completely mixed up in the space of five minutes.

After a brief welcome, Sergio told them he'd be bringing tapas for them to sample—and more drinks—whatever

they wanted.

Vicki asked if they'd ever made a Pisco martini.

“Of course! You'll love it!”

Lynn looked at her glass, which had only a sip left. She finished it, then ordered another. “I shouldn't, but they're so delicious.”

Sharon lifted her glass, drained it, then ordered another one. “Why not? We aren't driving tonight! And getting one of these in Virginia will probably be impossible!”

Lynn began to wonder if she'd be able to walk!

The tapas arrived one at a time and they all sampled them. Lynn's favorite by far was the shrimp skewer—

three shrimp grilled in some sort of delectable sauce. “I could eat a dozen of these,” she murmured.

Alex motioned to Sergio to bring four more skewers of shrimp for Lynn and handed him some money from his pocket.

Lynn tried to repay him, but he refused her offer. “I am pleased to give you something that makes you so happy, *Querida*.”

Lynn thought she knew what *querida* meant. *Yo quiero* meant “I like.” Or was it “I want?” The way Alex had used the word, it must mean “friend” or “someone I like.”

He reached for her hand and kissed her fingers, just as he’d done

before.

She didn't feel the least bit like blushing.

By the time Lynn had eaten half a dozen more shrimp and sampled the other tapas, her head had cleared nicely. As tempted as she was to order another strawberry Sour, she declined Sergio's offer to bring her a third and had more shrimp instead.

Some people across the room decided it was time to dance. They stayed near their tables, but were in sight of everyone at the booth.

Alex got up and danced next to their table. Vicki, Cathi, and Barb joined him. The others cheered. When Alex held his hand out to Lynn, inviting her to

dance, too, she laughed and shook her head. “Not tonight!” So, he invited Dorothy and the others to join him, but only Sharon got up. Lynn loved watching them, and wished she were more coordinated. In college she’d enjoyed dancing. She hadn’t danced since... It took her a minute to remember the last time. It was before she’d met Bill. He hated dancing. But she hadn’t!

Lynn finished her Pisco Sour and got up to join them. Alex laughed when he saw her trying to imitate their movements—and failing. But she had a great time and no one seemed to worry that she wasn’t that great at whatever dance they were doing.

Alex took her hand and twirled her

around, then pulled her closer, then away. When the music ended, he hugged her, then the others. She could hardly catch her breath!

Andrew took the opportunity to excuse himself because he had a meeting scheduled early tomorrow. “At ten. That’s as early as I do anything in Cusco!”

Everyone thanked him for including the *Museo* on their itinerary and for assigning Alex as their guide. Andrew beamed with pleasure. “Everyone loves Alex!” He bid them all good night.

They agreed they’d better get back to the hotel. Alex assured them, “I promise you’ll enjoy the tour tomorrow,

and we don't have to leave the hotel until 8:30."

Sharon groaned. "Why didn't you tell us that sooner?"

Lynn told her, "Because he's a good guide. He wasn't about to let us leave early when we were all having such a good time."

"Es la verdad."

They made their way upstairs, through the front room, which showed no signs of people leaving, and outside into the crisp air. Lynn shivered and pulled her sweater around her shoulders, with Alex's help. They let the others go ahead of them.

"Are you warm enough?"

"It isn't far to the hotel. I'll be

fine.” She shivered again.

Alex put his arm around her and pulled her closer. “I promised to see you safe and warm back to the hotel.”

“Yes, you did.” She loved the warmth coming from him, and the warmth in his expression while they walked across the plaza then down the street to the hotel entrance.

“I guess the two ladies who were camped out here earlier gave up waiting for us to buy something,” she said.

“They haven’t given up. They’ll be here first thing in the morning. Don’t forget that they expect you to bargain with them on the price.”

“I’ll remember that.”

By the time she and Alex went

inside, the others had already gone to their rooms.

“The courtyard is empty,” Alex said quietly.

“I like the music they’re playing in the lobby. It’s almost like the music is coming from the fountain.”

“Would you dance with me again?”

Lynn stopped suddenly. “Dance? I don’t have the energy to dance the way we did at the *Museo*. As you saw, I’m not very good at dancing.”

“You don’t have to be.” He took her in his arms and guided her slowly, expertly around the courtyard.

Her head began to whirl again, but not from the Pisco. She relaxed against

him and rested her head on his shoulder. He pulled her even closer.

When the music ended, Alex slowed and stopped, then waited for her to look at him.

She knew what to expect.

His lips touched hers ever so gently, softly, again and again, until she leaned toward him and kissed him just as softly.

“I had a wonderful time tonight.”

He leaned back. “I hope you sleep well, *Querida*.” He led her toward the stairs and they went to the second floor, then around toward Lynn’s room.

The door was inside an alcove. Lynn stepped in, then turned around. “Alex, I need to tell you—”

Before she could finish, he kissed her again, with more urgency and passion this time. She kissed him with the same passion, not wanting him to leave. How long had it been since she'd been kissed like this? Too long. In fact, she couldn't remember ever being kissed like this.

They heard movement inside the room.

“I have to go,” she whispered.

“Until tomorrow...”

Chapter 10

Lynn expected to have a headache the next morning, but she didn't. In fact, she'd slept better than she had since they'd arrived in Peru. Sharon was already in the shower. Lynn stretched, ran her fingers through her hair, then eased out of bed. The floor was cold. She hurried to pull on some warm socks. Sharon emerged from the bathroom rubbing her hair with a towel.

“Good morning, sunshine!”

“You seem perky this morning.”

“Slept like a baby. Looks like you did, too.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Nothing. You just look rested, that’s all.” She grabbed her clothes and sat down on the bed to put them on.

Lynn went to the bathroom and got into the shower. The hot water felt heavenly. When she came out of the bathroom, Sharon was leaving the room.

“Breakfast! The restaurant is at the back of the hotel. Go through the arched doorway below our room, in the center. Curve to the left.”

“I didn’t know you’d been there.”

“I haven’t. I got instructions last night at the front desk before coming upstairs.” Just before she closed the door, she added, “You aren’t a bad dancer at all. Especially with the right

partner.”

Lynn started to say something but Sharon closed the door. Which dancing did she mean? She guessed it didn't matter. As Sharon had said, she saw everything that happened to her friend.

She got to the restaurant before BJ and Barb, but the rest of the ladies were there. Lynn headed straight for the buffet and a cup of Coca tea. There were several things on their itinerary today that would require walking, and the first destination lay at 13,000 feet! She'd definitely need the energy from the tea. She put her cup on the table then helped herself to the buffet. She'd just sat down when Alex came in. As expected, he searched the room for her. Her table was

full, though, so he sat with Sheila, Vicki, and Cathi, who'd saved a place for him.

“Buenos días, Señor Vereau.”

Cathi pulled his chair out for him.

“Buenos días.” He went to get some tea and breakfast. He piled his plate high with fruit, vegetables, and eggs, then added some bread, butter, and packets of jelly. Back at the table, he held up one of the packets. “Have you tried this yet?”

They looked at the label. “Is that a Peruvian fruit?” Barb asked.

“Yes. *Aguaymento*. They’re also called golden berries. *Muy delicioso*. I brought extras.” He pulled some from his jacket pocket and placed them on the table. Then, he turned around, touched

Lynn's arm, and when she turned around, he handed her several of the packets for their table.

“*Gracias, Señor,*” she told him with a smile.

Alex started a conversation with the ladies at his table while Lynn shared the golden berries with the others at her table. He was right. The *Aguaymento* preserves were *delicioso*.

After breakfast, they returned to their rooms to gather what they needed for the day's touring. Sharon asked Lynn if she was going to check e-mail this morning.

“I guess I should.” While Sharon brushed her teeth, Lynn went online. Her list of posts was rather long, since she

hadn't checked in a while. Then she saw a post with an address she hadn't expected to see. Her mother's.

Sharon came out. "Anything interesting?"

Lynn finished reading the post, signed off, then closed her laptop. Her throat had closed as she read. Sharon saw her expression.

"What's happened?"

"My mother says she can't trust my father anymore and has...filed for divorce."

"But she can't do that! What kind of a lawyer—"

"She and Dad have had the same lawyer for years. He'd never go through with it if he knew what was causing her

to panic like this, and he would've called Dad the minute he hung up with Mom."

"You need to talk to your dad."

"Yes, and soon."

They went downstairs to use the telephone to call Santa Fe. Alex was in the lobby.

"What's wrong?"

Lynn should've known he'd recognize the panic in her expression. "I have to call my father."

Alex reached into his pocket and handed her his cell phone.

Lynn dug in her purse and offered him a wad of bills to pay for the call.

"No, *Querida*. It is my honor to help you reach your father."

“But the call will be expensive.”

“Tonight, at dinner, you can buy me a Pisco Sour.”

She nodded and accepted the phone. She went out to the courtyard to make the call.

Sharon watched her anxiously.

“It’s something bad, isn’t it?” Alex asked her.

“Did she tell you about her mother?”

He nodded.

“I should let Lynn tell you. Hopefully, her father can straighten things out.”

Alex watched Lynn wander through the courtyard, obviously distraught while she talked to her father,

gesturing with her left hand in a way that displayed obvious tension and worry. More than anything, he wanted to help her through this tragedy. He had to remind himself that it would not be appropriate for him to go to her while she was on the phone.

Sharon touched his arm. “She’s going to need help getting through this.”

“I know. I will do everything I can...whatever I can do...”

Sharon hugged him. “Thanks.”

Lynn stood there a moment before coming back inside and handing the phone back to Alex.

“Thank you.” She turned to Sharon. “My father had no idea. He’s calling their lawyer now. Thankfully,

Dad had already told him about Mom's odd behavior."

Alex frowned. "May I ask what your mother has done?"

Lynn squeezed his arm. "She told me in an email she was filing for divorce from my father. But their lawyer knows about her illness. Dad will let me know this evening by e-mail what they decide to do. Thanks for letting me use your phone. I hope it's okay with you...I told Dad he could call me back at your number."

"Of course. Do you want to keep the phone with you?"

She shook her head. "Right now I just want to try and believe that everything will be okay. Where are we

going this morning?”

“We’re going to some ruins, then to the Cusco Cathedral, which was built between 1560 and 1664, during the Renaissance. It is shaped like a cross, as many cathedrals are, and contains beautiful gold and wooden decorations.”

“It sounds beautiful.”

“While we are there, I will say a prayer for you and your parents that everything will work out for the best for all of you.”

Lynn felt tears coming. She was too emotional to speak, so she just nodded and smiled.

The morning passed in a blur for Lynn. The cathedral was as beautiful as Alex had suggested, and he had kept his

promise. While the group wandered from alcove to alcove, he took Lynn's hand and led her to a quiet place at the end of the corridor. With his head bowed, he murmured his prayer while holding her hand. Her tears couldn't be stopped this time.

When he finished the prayer, he held her for a moment, then suggested they get back to the group. "Don't worry, *Querida*. It will be okay."

She hoped he was right.

After leaving the cathedral, they went to Coricancha, the most important temple in the Inca Empire.

At the temple, so different from the cathedral, Lynn focused on learning as much as she could about the Inca, to

distract herself from what she'd find out this evening from her father. Alex did a great job of describing and explaining what made Coricancha such a special place for the Inca.

“The name Coricancha came from the Quechua word, Quri Qancha, which means ‘Golden Courtyard.’ Originally, it was called Inti Qancha, which means Temple of the Sun. Inti was the Inca sun god. The floors and walls were covered with sheets of gold, and in the courtyard were golden statues.”

Lynn tried to imagine the splendor of the temple after it was first built. Truly, the Inca had revered the sun as a god. Covering everything with gold was a perfect way to embellish the sun's rays

and reflect them into the city around the temple.

Alex's voice dropped when he told them, "When the Spanish arrived, they marveled at the temple, but felt it was pagan, since it was built to what they considered a false god. They removed the gold and tore the temple down. The Church of Santo Domingo was built on this site, using the stones from the destroyed temple. Parts of the temple, though, could not be destroyed, because the Inca stonework was so fine. The stones could not be separated. They remain in the foundation of the temple, and the church."

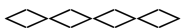
Vicki shook her head. "I can't believe they'd destroy such a beautiful

structure, simply because they didn't understand the Inca religion."

Lynn saw the conflict in Alex's face at Vicki's remarks. He'd told them he was a descendant of the Inca, yet he was Catholic. Surely, there must be conflict between those two cultures. What she'd seen in his eyes vanished, though, when he led them to another part of the ruins to show them where earthquakes had shaken and damaged the church, leaving the Inca stonework firmly in place.

Next, they visited an archaeological museum with artifacts found at Coricancha, including mummies, idols that were sacred to the Inca, and even pieces of cloth and

textiles. An incredible museum!



Next stop was lunch at the *Incanto* restaurant. Rudolfo parked the bus on a side street, as close to the Plaza de Armas as he could, then they walked, which felt great. They weaved their way through thick crowds of people, talking, laughing, and singing along with the band playing in the center of the Plaza. Lynn couldn't see the musicians for the people, but she could definitely hear them playing. The restaurant was about halfway down the street on one side of the Plaza de Armas. They ducked through the door, then climbed the stairs to the next floor.

On the way up, they passed Inca

stone walls, fitted together without mortar, and smoothed to perfection. Lynn had heard about the Inca's remarkable skills with stonework, but she'd never imagined the stones would be so perfectly shaped and arranged. The huge stones used to build the Giza pyramids also fit together incredibly well. But the Inca walls were smooth and so finely carved that they clearly were superior in workmanship to those at Giza. Inca walls were truly works of art.

Inside the restaurant, tables lined a wall of windows overlooking the Plaza de Armas, where the parade had just begun. Waiters escorted them to the tables.

Alex came in behind the group and

immediately spotted Lynn, sitting at the table to his right, which was already full. Barb, Vicki, and Sheila sat with her. At the next table were BJ and Dorothy, with Sharon and Cathi at the table behind them.

Sharon called to him. "Alex! We saved you a place!" She pointed toward the chair across from her, which faced back toward the group.

"Thank you, ladies. It will be my pleasure."

Sharon gave him an almost apologetic smile. "You can see the whole group from here, and when you tell us about what's going on in the Plaza, we'll all be able to hear you."

"Of course. Thank you."

Everyone ordered while sampling baskets of bread already on the table. Appetizers included garbanzo bean puree, pumpkin soup, and bruschetta over olive bread. Mediterranean Trout proved to be the favorite entrée. While enjoying the appetizers, Alex pointed out the various parts of the parade, and the statue in the center of the Plaza, of King Pachacutec, the Inca leader who had lived in Cusco, and who built Machu Picchu.

Lynn noticed that Alex pronounced the name of the King differently from what she'd always heard and seen in books. Instead of Pachacuti, Alex said Pachacutec, which Lynn had always liked better. It sounded more

distinguished and royal!

The waiter brought her pumpkin *crema* and she realized she could fix it at home using winter squash, potatoes, celery, and cream. What a delicious soup it was, especially with the bread!.

She listened to Alex's descriptions of the parade and made herself look out the window at the crowded Plaza below, and not directly at him. She didn't want to interrupt his teaching, and she certainly didn't want anyone to see the way he'd been looking at her. Or, she realized suddenly, how she'd been looking at him.

When the trout arrived, Alex sat down to enjoy his lunch too. Conversation dominated each table, with

waiters standing by to refill glasses and make sure everyone was pleased with the food.

At last! Lynn felt this day had been worth the entire trip, just to be in the midst of the Inca capital city. She could hardly believe she was here! She and the others at her table exclaimed over everything they saw in the Plaza—bands, military groups, marchers, floats, and people in native costumes. Those who had gathered for the spectacle cheered, laughed, danced, and ate foods sold by vendors. The only way it could've been any more perfect would've been sitting with Alex, seeing the pride and excitement in his eyes over this special occasion—with his hand in hers.

She risked glancing at him, but he was deep in conversation with Sharon and Cathi, who clearly enjoyed monopolizing his time. They had their guide's full attention, and that was exactly as it should be.



Time to move on. They had another stop to make before returning to the hotel for dinner and some rest. Then, tonight, they'd be going to the planetarium above Cusco. A full day.

On their way to the bus, Alex hung back until he could walk with Lynn.

“Did you enjoy your lunch?”

“Very much. I'm so glad everyone isn't trying to please the Americans by serving us hamburgers and fries!”

“Actually, you can get both at the hotel restaurant for dinner tonight, if you’re hungry for something that isn’t Peruvian.”

Lynn thought about it a minute. “I can have burgers and fries at home. While I’m here, I want to sample as many different Peruvian dishes as I can.”

That pleased him. He helped her onto the bus, then took his place in the front seat across from Rudolfo while Lynn went toward the back to what had become her “regular” seat. The bus was big enough they all had room to stretch while traveling from one place to the next. That was great.

Alex pointed out various landmarks on their way to the Inka

Museum. They spent about an hour there, seeing pottery, mummies, silver figures, textiles, and even musical instruments made and used by the Inca.

Out in the central courtyard of the museum, several women dressed in brightly colored Inca costumes sat before their looms, weaving blankets, shawls, and other things the *turistas* loved to take home with them. Lynn stood behind one woman, admiring her skill with weaving. As soon as the woman noticed her standing there, she began to recite the prices of the various things she'd made, which were stacked in abundance on shelves near her loom.

They all took their time looking through her offerings, and several bought

things from her. Prices in Peru were quite reasonable, since the local currency—*soles*—were worth about a third of the American dollar. Prices quoted in *soles* could be divided by three to get a good idea of the cost in dollars. One thing they'd all learned in Lima was that most vendors didn't keep American money, so a twenty dollar bill in payment for an item costing forty-five *soles* might not result in change. Exchanging US dollars for *soles* was definitely the best thing to do.

Lynn had discovered, the first time she'd bought something with American money, that the vendors would not take any bill with the slightest tear or mark. They explained that the bank would not

take damaged US money. Even the exchanges wouldn't take bills that weren't perfect. So a lot of their cash was worthless!

By the time they left the Inka Museum, Lynn was exhausted. Even Vicki had removed her shoes and massaged the arches of her feet. Vicki had always been the most active of their group, and she generally “led the pack” wherever they went. If Vicki's feet were getting sore, then everyone needed some rest!

At the hotel, Lynn knew she needed to check e-mail as soon as she got back to the room, but it was the last thing she wanted to do.

Chapter 11

Nothing from Santa Fe. After some rest, everyone gathered at the bus to go to the Cusco Planetarium. Lynn had taken Alex's advice and worn warm clothes, since they'd be outside part of the time, looking through the telescope.

Before helping her onto the bus, Alex asked her quietly, "Is everything okay at home?"

"No word yet, but I hope so."

They wound their way through Cusco, then up the mountain. The lights below and on the mountainsides all around the city reminded Lynn of a trip

she'd made to Mexico City when she was in high school. Their flight had arrived after dark and the pilot circled the vast metropolitan area before landing. There weren't nearly as many lights in Cusco, but they were more beautiful, Lynn thought, because the air at this altitude was so clean and clear.

When the bus stopped, everyone got out, but they didn't see the planetarium. "So, where is it?" Sharon asked Alex.

"It's still above us. The bus cannot go all the way to the top of the mountain. Here they come now in their vans, to take us the rest of the way."

The owners of the planetarium arrived and took everyone up to the

building and inside. The *turistas* sat on benches and listened to a brief talk about the Inca and their religious beliefs that related to stars and constellations. Lynn sat between BJ and Barb. Alex stood at the back of the room.

“Welcome to the Cusco Planetarium! Before we go outside to view some of the heavens’ spectacular inhabitants that are visible this time of year, I want to tell you about how the Inca felt about the stars. The sun and moon were thought to be gods, and Inca agriculture was definitely related to such events as the summer and winter solstices and the equinoxes, and the position of the sun and moon in the sky.”

Lynn whispered to Barb, “If I fall

asleep, catch me before I fall off this bench!”

“If you’ll promise to catch me, too!”

“The Inca believed that the creator, Viracocha, protected all living beings, and that the stars he created had special meaning, if only the people would believe the stories told about them. To them, the constellations were shaped like birds and animals, such as the fox, llama, toad, birds, or the serpent. You may have noticed snakes in paintings by Inca artists.

“What we call the Milky Way, the Inca called a great river in the sky. Floating on this river, they saw bright constellations made of stars, and dark

constellations, which were dark blotches against a lighter part of the sky. The Inca believed these dark constellations to be Earth's living animals. Everything on Earth and in the sky was connected. Kind of like 'The Force' in the movies."

Lynn found that comparison extremely interesting. She could remember Yoda telling Luke that The Force connected everything, even trees, rocks, and water. It had always been one of the most comforting theories she'd ever heard.

She leaned back a little to stretch her back and glimpsed Alex standing off to the side of the group now, instead of behind them. His smile made her wish she could invite him to sit next to her.

The talk ended within a few minutes and they moved on to the next part of the tour—the dome of the planetarium.

Lynn was getting so sleepy, she had a hard time staying awake in the darkened room. Alex sat down beside her and took her hand. Without thinking twice about it, she leaned toward him and rested her head on his shoulder.

Much too soon, the presentation ended and they were invited to go outside to take turns looking through the telescope, which stood on the ground and was about four feet tall.

Lynn shivered in spite of several layers of clothing and her jacket. The breeze came from behind the building,

so she stood on the covered walkway, as much out of the wind as possible. There were two dogs outside who weren't shy at all about approaching the group to be petted. Lynn wished she could wrap her arms around the bigger dog and share his warmth!

While the group took turns looking at a star that turned out to be two stars close together, then a group of stars that had colors and looked like jewels, Lynn pressed closer to the building, wishing she could go inside. After Alex had taken his turn viewing the phenomena, he came to the porch, stood beside her, then eased his arm around her and pulled her in front of him.

Immediately, she felt the warmth

of his body on her back. She relaxed against him, his arms circling her waist, and silently thanked him. He held her hands with his, then whispered in her ear, “If you aren’t warm enough, I’ll try to do better.”

Lynn was grateful it was so dark outside, yet she knew that anyone who looked toward them would see Alex holding her. The telescope had been repositioned to capture Saturn. It took several minutes for the astronomer to get it exactly right. He placed a stool beside the telescope. “Who wants to see?”

Lynn knew she needed to be first. She pulled gently out of Alex’s arms and said, “Me! I’ve never seen Saturn except in photographs!”

A murmur traveled through the group. No one else had, either.

When she approached the telescope, she instinctively touched it before sitting on the stool.

“Don’t touch the telescope!”

She took two quick steps back.

“Sorry. It’s just that it’s really delicate.” He looked through the eyepiece, then repositioned the scope, which took another minute.

“I had no idea...” Lynn said apologetically.

“No problem. Just sit and lean forward to the eyepiece.”

She did as he said, then gasped. In the center of the black circle of sky, Saturn hung like a crystal, slightly tipped

to the side, with the rings circling it. It wasn't that big—the size of a silver dollar, maybe—but seeing it as it actually was, and not in a photo, took her breath away.

“Wow,” she whispered. “It’s actually there!”

Reluctantly, she stepped back to let Dorothy take her place. The image remained in her mind on her way back to the porch. Alex was there waiting, watching her with an expression she hadn't seen before. It was so dark, it might have been anything, of course, but it seemed different. More intense and emotional.

He suddenly looked down, then back to her, smiling.

She hadn't imagined it. The look he'd given her—

Sharon had just gotten up from the chair. "That was incredible! Thank you so much!"

Before long, they were back on the bus and on their way to dinner. But the bus stopped before it had made it all the way down the mountain back to the city and pulled into a parking lot by a church. They got out and went to the fence surrounding the lot and gazed over the city, with its lights of every color, and paler white lights dotting the mountainsides.

Alex stood beside her, but didn't take her hand this time. Instead, she took his. Together, they gave themselves time

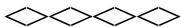
to become part of the city Alex loved so much.

They proceeded to a restaurant with more native music and dancing. A group sang and played while several dancers made their way through the crowd during dinner. After they finished playing, the musicians wandered around, selling copies of their CD, which Lynn and two others bought.

Lynn said very little during dinner. Alex sat beside her, their knees touching under the long tablecloth, their fingers laced. Alex spent most of the time watching the musicians instead of looking at Lynn, which she knew was best.

When they got back on the bus, she

made her way back to her usual seat. She had to have some time with Alex, alone. From the way he'd looked at her, she could tell he wanted that, too.



At the hotel, Lynn was last to leave the bus.

Alex whispered, "Let's take a walk. I know it's cold, but I'll keep you warm."

She nodded, caught up with Sharon, and told her she'd be up in a while, then went back outside. Alex put his arm around her shoulders while they walked. Before long, they reached the plaza where they'd sat on the bench, but they didn't sit there. Instead, Alex led her around the edge and stopped when

they got to a clump of flowering shrubs that were taller than they were. The clump hid a space in the center and it was to that space, rather like the center of a grape arbor, that he led her. With the fragrance of the flowers surrounding them, they couldn't be seen by anyone in the plaza.

“Are you cold?”

“No, thanks to you.”

“*Querida*, I need to tell you something.”

Lynn held her breath.

“I told you I have to come to think of you as a special friend. Yet, my feelings have grown deeper than friendship.”

“I know.”

“Your tour will end soon. We’ll go to the Sacred Valley tomorrow for two nights, then on to Machu Picchu for one night, then back to Cusco for your last night here before you fly to Lima, then home.”

“Yes,” she whispered, as he pulled her closer.

“I don’t want you to go.”

She held him tighter, her cheek against his chest, loving the way he caressed her back and arms, creating a warmth inside her that made her breathing quicken and her heart beat faster.

“I have to go home, Alex.”

“I want you to stay longer. After this tour, I will have two weeks off, with

no new groups. We could take our time getting to know each other better, spending more than a few moments together.”

The idea made her sigh. If only she could...

“I know we haven’t known each other very long, but I feel...drawn to you...in a way I’ve never felt before. Please, *Querida*, stay in Cusco with me.”

“*Querida*. It means ‘friend,’ doesn’t it?”

“No.” He leaned back so she would look directly into his eyes. “It means ‘sweetheart.’”

When they kissed this time, she wanted to show him that her feelings

also went far beyond those between special friends. He kissed her lips, her cheeks, her eyelids, then her lips again. She couldn't hold him tightly enough, couldn't kiss him deeply enough, and couldn't imagine having to leave him.

Lynn lost herself in the kiss.

Staying with Alex would mean freedom for her. Freedom from worry, from responsibility, from work, but most of all from her feeling of duty. Never had she known anyone who created this feeling of freedom in her, this desire to become part of another person. How could she leave? But how could she stay?

Chapter 12

She entered the room quietly.

Sharon, propped up in bed, put down the guide book next to the open laptop beside her.

Lynn didn't say anything. She went to the bathroom to change out of her clothes and into her pajamas and robe. When she emerged, Sharon was staring at her with a puzzled look on her face.

“Okay, either you went for broke, or broke it off.”

Lynn couldn't look at her friend yet. She stacked the pillows behind her, climbed into bed, and pulled the covers up around her chin.

“You went for broke.”

Lynn nodded. “Actually, he went for broke. He wants me to stay in Cusco another two weeks after our tour ends.”

“What did you tell him?”

“That I can’t. But I wish I could.”

“Flights can be rescheduled.”

“I know. I just wish things were easier at home.”

“Your dad and the lawyer will work things out. There’s no way an Alzheimer’s patient can divorce her husband. And it may not be Alzheimer’s. It could be something else causing the confusion. Like a reaction to medication.”

“I hope you’re right. I hope it will prove to be something that can be easily

fixed.” Lynn turned on her side, facing Sharon. “I can’t believe I’ve let things get so out of control.”

Sharon released a huge sigh. “You still think falling in love means you’re out of control.”

“That’s exactly what it means when the person you’re falling in love with lives so far away that calling it a ‘long distance romance’ is utterly ridiculous. It isn’t as though we could see each other on weekends, or once a month. More like once a year, if I could afford the flight. It’s like loving someone who lives on the moon! Sharon, I have to wake up! This is a dream, and as wonderful as it’s been so far, it’s going to turn into a nightmare in a few days!”

“Maybe sooner. You got a post from your dad.”

“When?”

“Right after I got back to the room. Not much you can do from here, though. Your mother left. He has no idea where she’s gone. Police are searching for her car, checking flights, but so far there’s no indication of where she’s going or exactly when she left. I answered and told him we’d be waiting for news.”

Lynn closed her eyes. Her tears soaked into the pillow.

“There’s nothing you can do, Lynn. They’ll find her and she’ll be all right. You have to believe that.”

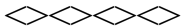
Lynn turned over to face the wall. Nothing she could do. She wished Alex

were there to hold her, rub her back, kiss her and tell her... But he hadn't told her he loved her. He'd shown her. How did that help this miserable situation?

Falling in love with him would only complicate things to the point where she wanted to hide somewhere until, like a fairy tale, everyone lived happily ever after.

Sharon closed the laptop and put it on the dresser across the room. "Time to get some sleep. But first, tell me if Cher was right."

Lynn took a deep breath. "She was right."



The next morning, they had a quick breakfast in the restaurant. Lynn had two

cups of Coca tea, hoping it would lift her spirits. She hadn't slept well, which certainly wasn't a surprise, and the tea helped wake her up a bit. Even though she wasn't that hungry, she ate a full breakfast. It could be a long time until lunch.

Alex seemed almost embarrassed this morning. Surely, he didn't regret the time they'd spent together, and asking her to stay in Cusco. Maybe she'd misinterpreted his expression and the way he avoided looking into her eyes for longer than a few seconds. She wanted to see happiness on his face instead of confusion.

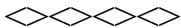
When Alex sat down adjacent from Lynn with his plate piled high and

his cup of tea, he immediately started a conversation with Sharon and Barb, who sat at the table with them, about what they'd be seeing today. Beneath the table, he reached for Lynn's hand and caressed it while he talked.

“This morning we will go to the Cusco Market, then we'll visit the ruins of Tambomachay, the Red Fortress, then the fortress of Sacsayhuamán. It is one of the most important and famous Inca sites in all of South America. Its name is Quechua and means ‘satisfied falcon.’ Those who served at the fortress protected Cusco, which was the capital city of the Inca Empire.”

Also on the itinerary were two museums, but Lynn's mind wandered

from Alex's descriptions. She tried to pay attention but kept thinking about her father's email. Holding Alex's hand was another distraction, but a nicer one. She remembered last night, standing together at the planetarium, then hiding from everyone at the plaza, giving in to the feelings that had been building in her, day by day. She closed her eyes and remembered kissing him, then felt his hand tightening around hers. With a smile, she realized she'd squeezed his fingers during the memory.



They boarded the bus and rode to the Cusco Market, where they were given about an hour to wander through. When Lynn went inside and saw how

massive the market was, she knew they could never do more than sample what lay before them in only an hour.

Wandering, wishing she could go up and down the aisles and see everything, she marveled at what she was able to see.

People sat at tables eating chicken soup, which Alex said was the cheapest lunch in Cusco. They passed dozens of vendors selling everything from clothing to dozens of varieties of potatoes—purple, green white, red, orange, yellow—a rainbow of potatoes—in the midst of multicolored varieties of corn, and dozens of fruits, vegetables, cheeses, and foods Lynn could only guess about.

They had little time to stop and browse. But when Lynn spied some

long-handled wooden spoons with bowls six inches in diameter, she had to stop and buy several. What an incredible soup ladle it would be!

After seeing just enough of the market to get a taste of the quantity and variety of merchandise available, they were outside, where women sat with small grills, roasting guinea pigs! Flies hovered around the roasted pigs.

“It’s never good to buy *cuy* outside the market,” Alex said quietly. “You have no idea how long they’ve been trying to sell that same *cuy*.”

It was time to leave. Lynn wished she had another month to explore every shop inside the market and every shop on the streets of Cusco. She knew if she

had enough time, she'd fall in love with Cusco...just as she'd fallen in love with Pisco Sours...and just as she was falling in love with Alex.

Back on the bus, Sharon tried to check e-mail but couldn't find a wireless signal.

Next, they stopped at a place Lynn knew she'd never forget. Alex seemed especially happy to be there. "This is a sanctuary for injured animals and birds. They built it among the ruins of Qenko, where they found a huge rock shaped like a puma." He pointed toward it, explaining that the rock stood almost twenty feet tall. "There are also drawings and carvings of pumas here in underground rooms and along stairways.

But the wonder of this place is the animals that have been brought here to get well.”

They followed a walkway with trellises covered with plants and vines, creating a shady retreat from the strong Peruvian sunshine. Off to the right were pens with llamas, alpacas, and, higher on the hillside, vicuñas.

“It’s all right to pet the llamas and alpacas, if they agree, but no one pets the vicuñas. They spit and bite.”

Lynn went straight to a brown llama that had come to the fence bordering the walkway. She gave the shaggy llama time to get used to her being there, then raised her hand slowly to pet the side of its face. “I’ve heard

there's nothing more wonderful than being 'kissed' by a llama."

Alex grinned and lowered his face to the llama's nose, which twitched, then moved over Alex's mouth and chin, brushing the long hairs on its nose across his skin. "It's a feeling like no other," he said after leaning back.

Lynn tried it next. He was right. She'd never felt anything like it.

Another group of tourists had parked behind their bus and several rowdy children pushed past them.

Alex took Lynn's arm and eased her back from the llama. "Look at his ears."

"He flattened them. Why?"

"Probably the children, but you

are the one he'll spit on if we don't back away."

"Good idea."

They went on down the walkway. Lynn petted two more llamas and one alpaca. The vicuñas watched from their higher pens and one of them stomped at the activity down below. Lynn wished she could've seen them up close.

Walking between buildings that held small mountain cats and other mammals, they came to a wire gate and went inside a large enclosure that had wire mesh walls and ceiling. At the back of the enclosure was a cliff, with alcoves and shelves where birds perched. But they weren't just any birds. They were huge and black and almost

vicious looking.

“What are they?” Lynn whispered.

“Andean condors.”

“They’re enormous!”

Without warning, a condor that had been standing behind Lynn walked past her, brushing her legs with its enormous wings. Startled, she backed away, but the condor didn’t seem to notice her at all. The huge bird spread its wings and hurried toward the back wall, where Lynn saw several men climbing from shelf to shelf.

“Watch, everyone!” Alex called to the group.

The men took turns “spooking” the condors roosting on the shelves and then pitching them into the air. Their

incredible wings spread in flight, with spans of more than eight feet. They flew above everyone's heads to the far side of the enclosure, where other attendants waited with food for them.

Spectacular! Even though their faces resembled vultures, Lynn thought seeing them in flight was one of the most breathtaking things she'd ever witnessed.

Back on the bus, Alex took his place at the front and began his talk about the ruins they were going to see next.

Sacsayhuamán was an enormous place with incredible Inca stonework. Some of the stones in the wall were more than thirty feet tall and perfectly

carved to fit the stones on either side, and above them. Alex told them with a feisty grin that most people thought the name sounded like “sexy woman.” He winked at Lynn.

The ruins were incredible and massive. It took a long time to walk from one end to the other, then back to the bus.



The afternoon, as full as the morning had been, included a museum that rapidly became Lynn’s favorite. La Casa Concha Museum of Machu Picchu, a colonial Spanish mansion, contained thousands of artifacts from Machu Picchu that had been discovered by Hiram Bingham in 1912 and taken out of Peru to Yale University. It was only

during the past decade that an agreement had been made to bring the artifacts back to Peru, to the museum. There, in ten exhibition rooms, the amazing artifacts of Machu Picchu were on display, along with enlarged photographs taken by Hiram Bingham.

They wandered through all the rooms, marveling at what was discovered beneath the plants that covered the city after it was abandoned in 1572. It was only by accident that Bingham happened upon the ruins and mistakenly identified it as Vilcabamba, the lost city of the Inca. The fact that the city had not been destroyed, though, disproved Bingham's theory. The city he found had never been found by the

Spanish, which made it a previously unknown find and one of immeasurably greater value than the ruins of Vilcabamba would've been.

The room at La Casa Concha that affected Lynn the most contained a model of Machu Picchu at least twenty feet long and spotlighted to identify the various parts of the city. When she saw the model, her throat tightened and tears came without warning. She sat on a bench near the model, emotion overwhelming her.

Alex came to the door and looked inside. When he saw her sitting there, he hesitated. "Lynn? Are you all right?"

She turned to look at him, tears still falling, and held out her hand to

him. He sat beside her, then embraced her.

“What’s wrong, *Querida*? Has there been news of your mother?”

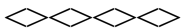
“No, it isn’t that.” She held him tighter. “It’s silly, I guess, but when I saw the model, my first thought was that I’ll actually be there the day after tomorrow. It took me by surprise.” She looked back at the model, then wiped her eyes with one hand. “It’s something I’ve dreamed about my whole life.”

Alex squeezed her tighter. “I understand. Even now, though I have been there hundreds of times, I still feel awe when I see it.”

When she turned to look at him again, knowing they would be sharing

her life-long dream, she knew the experience would be even more amazing and memorable.

“Kiss me,” she whispered, and he was happy to comply.



Dinner that night was another buffet with live music. By the time they got back to the hotel, everyone was exhausted. Alex and Lynn took another walk around the plaza. Their kisses seemed to be sweeter each time, and they both found it more difficult to say good-night.

Saturday morning, she finished her Coca tea and the rest of a sweet roll, then went with the group back to the lobby, where their luggage was being

carried out to the bus for their trip to the Sacred Valley of the Inca this afternoon.

“Does the Sacred Valley look like Cusco?” she asked Alex.

“It’s just as beautiful as Cusco, but in a different way. The Valley is more spread out, and since it’s at a lower altitude, more plants grow there. And there’s plenty of sunshine. I have a feeling you will love it as much as you love Cusco.”

“I know I will.”

When Sharon got up from the table, she leaned down and whispered, “He doesn’t know what to think this morning about your mood. He needs to know. I’ll tell him.”

Before Lynn could object, Sharon

motioned to Alex and pulled him off to the side after leaving the restaurant. She told him about the post from Lynn's father. "She's upset this morning—but not with you. I wanted you to know. She's going to need support from everyone today. Especially from you."

"Thank you. I hope she will get good news today."

Sharon squeezed his arm.

"Thanks."

They stopped several times on the way, traveling through gorgeous countryside that reminded Lynn a little of Virginia. That afternoon, they checked into the Casa Andina Sacred Valley, and it was everything Alex had said it would be. The rooms were in several rows

behind the main building, on the side of the mountain, one tier above the other, with winding walkways and staircases leading to each group of rooms. Between the rows, flowers, trees, and some plants that Lynn had never seen before had been arranged artistically in curving beds. Most delightful and surprising were the hummingbirds that buzzed and hovered all through the gardens, sampling flowers of every imaginable color. Some of the hummers were enormous, compared to hummingbirds in the US. And several of them were royal blue and appeared to be iridescent!

“It’s like a fairy tale,” Dorothy said softly. “Tony will want to do a dozen paintings from the photos I’ll take

here.”

Barb already had her camera out, trying to capture one of the hummingbirds, but they were too quick for the shutter and always zipped away before she could take the picture.

Vicki pulled out her camera. “Let me try. I’ll share.” She waited for the bird to come back, then pressed the button. The camera took at least half a dozen photos, so rapidly they couldn’t count the times the camera clicked. “One of them will be good, I promise. And I’ll be taking a lot more!”

By the time they reached their rooms on the top level, Lynn was struggling to breathe. Sheila stopped to catch her breath, too. “Did anyone count

how many steps we've climbed since the lobby?"

BJ leaned against one of the railings. "Had to be at least a thousand. Okay, maybe a hundred. And fifty."

The bellboys who were carrying their luggage to their rooms jogged up the steps as though there were only a dozen.

Lynn shook her head. "How can they do that?"

Alex offered her his arm to help her up the last group of steps. "They live here. Cusco is even higher. The Valley ranges from 7,000 to 10,000 feet in altitude."

Lynn shook her head. "Only 10,000?"

“Don’t worry, though. Machu Picchu sits at about 8,000 feet.”

Lynn heard several groans to go with her own. When they finally reached their rooms, they turned and gazed across the roof of the main building of the hotel and beyond. It seemed like a computer graphic image from a movie. How could such a beautiful place be real?

Once they were inside their rooms, no one came out for a good while. Each room had a balcony on the back. That was the first place Lynn went. She saw houses off to the right and children playing outside. When the children saw her outside, they came running, laughing and calling, “*Turistas!*”

Dulces! Dinero! Por favor!”

Sharon followed her outside.

“Don’t do it. If you give them anything, we’ll never get any sleep!”

Lynn knew she was right. Their faces, though, were so sweet and happy. They laughed and played as though they didn’t have a care in the world. She envied them.

Chapter 13

Dinner in the hotel restaurant proved to be as delicious as all the Peruvian food they'd enjoyed on this trip. Lynn had encouraged Alex to spend time with the other ladies, and he'd agreed that was a good idea. Once again, he ordered *ceviche*. She guessed he'd never get tired of it, even if he ate a plate full every day.

Walking down all those steps had been easy. Now, they were faced with climbing them again. The sun had gone behind the mountain, so dusk had sent most of the hummingbirds off to roost for

the night. Once again, without the sun, the temperature fell sharply. She could hear Alex laughing in the midst of their group. She loved the way he laughed, free and happy, without a care in the world, like the children on the mountain. Surely, though, he had daily problems, just like the rest of them.

That thought led to one that wasn't as carefree as his laughter. What did she really know about him after only a week? He'd never told her anything about his parents, whether he had siblings, nieces and nephews, close friends. She knew he'd had to have had several girlfriends in the past. Had he ever gotten close to marrying one of them? Or, was he divorced? She had to

admit that she knew almost nothing about his personal life here in Peru. How did he come to be a guide? Had he gone to school to learn all he knew about his country? Was there such a thing as a degree or license to be a tour guide?

How could she even consider staying in Peru with Alex when she knew virtually nothing about him? Yet, she felt she'd known him forever in some ways. It was like meeting someone she instantly liked, for no apparent reason. She liked Alex. She liked the way he smiled, and the way his whole face smiled. That said a lot about him, didn't it? His hair was shiny and full, and he was physically healthy, without being overly muscular, which meant he

didn't lift weights or spend hours trying to impress women with his body. One of his tours was the Inca Trail, which took four days and involved hours and hours of hiking on rough ground. Obviously, he also got plenty of exercise climbing thousands upon thousands of steps!

During the week they'd been here, Lynn felt stronger than she'd felt in ages, thanks to all the walking and climbing they'd done. When they'd first arrived, climbing steps at sea level in Lima had winded her by the end of the day. Now, they were climbing a lot more steps every day, at altitude, and most of them were uneven, tall stone steps that would've exhausted her at home.

Virginia had been home for more

than a decade after she graduated from high school. During that time, she'd visited her parents in California, then in Santa Fe, twice a year. Virginia had truly become home. So how could she consider leaving home and moving to a different country?

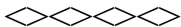
She remembered something her father had told her when they'd moved to Santa Fe. She'd questioned the move...

“But you’ve been in northern California all your married life! Why are you suddenly moving to New Mexico? The climate there is completely different—dry and arid compared to where you live now. In California, you’re surrounded by forests!”

“There’s a wonderful forest near Santa Fe. If we miss the trees, we can escape the desert, be back in the forest on the mountain, and be home again the same day.”

“It’s just hard for me to think about you and Mom leaving your home.”

“Home is where Mom and I are. It doesn’t matter where, as long as we’re together...”



A knock at the door. Sharon answered. “Alex! We had an incredible time today! Come in!”

“Thank you.” He stepped into the room glancing around, looking for Lynn, then removed his hat. Lynn sat on her bed, leaning back against several

pillows, reading the guide book on Machu Picchu.

Sharon motioned him to a chair next to a round table near the doors to the balcony. "I'm constantly amazed that you remember so much about the places we've toured. You must have studied for years to learn it all!"

"I learned it in college. I studied three years, then got my license in Tourism."

One question answered.

He glanced at Lynn. "I came to see...if you might..." He gave Sharon an embarrassed smile and twirled his hat in his hands, obviously nervous.

"Of course she'd like to take a walk! I was just about to get ready for

bed. I'm reading a book by a man who toured Machu Picchu. I want to be ready when we get there! I'm going to have a thousand questions!"

Lynn gave Sharon a grateful smile. "I'm sure he'll be able to answer them all. I'll get my coat. I'll bet it's getting colder by the minute out there."

"You won't need it long." The hint of a blush colored his cheeks.

Lynn put her coat on then preceded him to the door. "I have my key."

"Take your time!" Sharon closed the door after they'd gone out on the walkway.

Lights glittered below in the main building of the hotel and beyond, in the area across the highway.

“It’s so beautiful here. So peaceful, now that the children behind the hotel have gone inside.”

“They can be really noisy when they see *turistas* on the balconies. The next time you stay here, you should request a room on one of the lower levels.”

“The next time?”

“Well, if you come back to the Sacred Valley on another tour...” He offered her his arm so they could walk.

“If I come back, you’ll be my guide, won’t you?”

“Yes, always.”

She leaned against him. “Where are we going?”

“To my room.”

“Alex...” She stopped and waited for him to explain.

“I think we need to talk about what has happened, what is still happening between us. I don’t want to do that with other people around. I sense that you have many questions about me.”

“I do. All right, let’s go to your room. I know you have questions, too.”

“A few.” He hurried their pace then reached in his pocket for a key. His room wasn’t that far from Lynn’s. He opened the door and allowed her to go inside first.

The room was similar, but not identical to hers. He’d put everything into the closet, apparently, since there were no clothes or other personal items

in sight. He hung the strap of his hat over the corner of the chair by the balcony door.

“I’m sorry there’s only one chair.”

“We don’t need it.” She pulled the pillows from under the bedspread to lean back against, sat on the edge of the bed, then took off her shoes and pulled her knees up, then turned to face the other side of the bed.

He immediately understood what she wanted him to do. He took off his shoes, pulled out the other pillows, then sat on the other side of the bed, mirroring her position. “I didn’t know... I wasn’t sure...”

“There’s a lot we don’t know about each other. Things I’ve wondered

about, that I need to know. Tell me about your family and your childhood.”

His face brightened and he sighed, relaxing into the subject with obvious comfort. “My parents were born in Peru. I have three brothers and two sisters. Three of them still live in Cusco. The other two live in Lima. One is a bookkeeper for a big company. She was always good with numbers. The other owns a clothing store. My father died four years ago. We still miss him every day. My mother lives in the house where we grew up, very near my house in Cusco. I bought the house after I became a guide. Many times I’d get home late, and my mother would always wake up and want to cook something for me. I felt

it best that I live on my own, so I wouldn't be a burden to her.”

While he spoke, Lynn realized that everything she'd assumed about him was true. He'd been raised in a loving family, with siblings who took care of each other, just as their parents had taken care of them. Education was considered important in their family. His mother had been pleased when he'd chosen to study the history of their country so he could share his love of Peru, and especially of Cusco, with others. She'd protested when he'd moved to his own house, and insisted he come home whenever he had a break between tours.

“How many times have you hiked the Inca Trail?”

“More than 400.”

“How many times have you been to Machu Picchu?”

“Many more than that.”

They talked back and forth for an hour about the tours he loved best, how he found something new to see on each tour, and how each group of *turistas* brought a different view of his country—and theirs. Lynn also mentioned her relationship with Bill and they talked about why it hadn’t worked between them.

“I needed more in my life! Bill was content to watch football and fishing instead of actually going to the games or catching fish from a boat!”

Alex told her, “I was in love once.

We were engaged to be married, but it didn't work out."

"I'm sorry."

"She said she wanted to leave Peru and live in the United States. A company had supposedly offered her a job, and she told me she couldn't turn it down. It was the chance of a lifetime, she said. So, I had to let her go. But, in the end, she didn't leave Cusco. She married a friend of mine."

He looked away suddenly, and she saw distress in his eyes. She reached for him and pulled him toward her. He wasted no time kissing her. Their embrace felt wonderful and became perfect as they moved closer together.

"I know you could never leave the

country you love so much,” she whispered.

“It is my home. Being a guide is what I was meant to do in this life.”

“So you could never consider living anywhere else. I understand.”

His answer was a kiss that went on and on, his hands roaming over her arms and back while she caressed his face, his neck, and ran her fingers up through his thick, curly hair. Lynn felt his tears and her own on her cheeks.

“That’s why we needed to talk, *Querida*. It hurts me to think that you might leave Peru in only a few days and I might never see you, or hold you again. Even when I thought I was going to be married and she left me, it wasn’t

anything like this. I'm so afraid I'm going to lose you."

Lynn wished she could tell him he had nothing to fear, that she'd already decided to stay in Cusco, to find out if they truly were meant to be together. But with her mother missing, how could she be sure of what lay ahead? She wanted to stay, but that decision lay beyond her reach. "Alex, I need to tell you why I can't decide right now."

He kissed the tears on her cheeks, then kissed her lips gently, lightly, with extreme care, as though he were kissing a rare gem.

"My mother has disappeared."

His eyes widened. "Disappeared? What happened to her?"

“My father has no idea. She left in her car, and now he’s looking for her. A few weeks ago, she went out to lunch, but then couldn’t find her way home. She ended up in another city! So, if she’s driving, there’s no telling which direction she went, where she’d intended to go, or where she ended up.”

“I’m so sorry. I never would’ve _____”

“It’s all right. You didn’t know. When my father finds her—and he will find her—I could have some hard decisions to make. It will depend on what the doctor finds out about why she’s behaving so oddly. But while I’m here in Peru—with you—my only decision is to tell you the truth, to keep

asking questions—and answering any questions you have—so when the time comes, we can decide what’s best—for both of us.”

He pulled her against him again.

“*Te amo, Querida*. I love you.”

“I know,” she said. “I can tell.

There are many things I love about you, too.”

He kissed her again, then whispered, “I hoped you would want to stay here with me, tonight. That we could be closer, so we can tell if we’re meant to be together. But now I think that would not be the best thing for us to do. Not while your mother is in danger and you are so worried about her.”

Lynn tried not to think about her

mother being in danger. She was just going somewhere and hadn't told her father or anyone else where she was going. But Alex was right. Tonight was not the right time. She loved him for understanding.

“When we are together for the first time, I don't want you to think about anything except being with me, *Querida*.”

Lynn kissed him again. “By tomorrow, I'm hoping I'll know where my mother has gone. She's always been a strong-willed woman, and this may simply be one of those times when she decided to go somewhere and didn't tell Dad about it. He calls them her ‘surprises.’ But somehow I don't think

that's what's happened this time. I have to know, though, before I can make any decisions about my own life. Thank you for understanding."

Lynn eased down beside him, with her head on his chest and her arm across him. He kissed her, caressed her, then they lay there a long time, just holding each other.

Chapter 14

The next morning, before leaving for breakfast, Sharon nudged Lynn. “I hate to wake you, but you’ll want some food before we get started on today’s trek.

“Umm. Thanks. I hope I didn’t wake you when I came in last night.”

“Just enough to check the time and wonder why you’d gotten back so early.”

“We talked for a long time.”

“And—”

“That’s all. Just talked.”

“Oh.” She turned toward the door.

“He was worried about my

mother. Because I'm worried about my mother. Have you checked e-mail this morning?"

"I'm taking the laptop with me. We can check in the restaurant while we're stuffing ourselves with mass quantities of Peruvian eggs."

"Sounds good. I'll be there as soon as I can walk without stumbling."

"I'll save you a chair next to Alex."

Lynn gave her a smile she hoped would convey thanks and instructions not to ask any more questions.

In the restaurant, Lynn went straight to get Coca tea. Even though all the hiking they'd done had increased her stamina, it was still difficult to breathe

at times at these altitudes. She spied the group sitting along one side of the restaurant, which had huge windows on three sides overlooking amazing gardens. Sharon and Alex were sitting together with an empty chair at the end of the table.

Lynn filled her plate then joined them. “Good morning, everyone! If Sharon hadn’t awakened me this morning, I could’ve slept until noon.”

Several agreed they could’ve slept longer, too.

Vicki told her, “There’s no way I’m missing the Pisac Market today. We’ve had so little time to shop, this could be my only chance to stock up on gifts for everyone!”

Alex told her, “There is a market in *Aguas Calientes*, too. That’s the Machu Picchu Pueblo, on the Urubamba River. I promise you’ll have at least twenty minutes there tomorrow after we get off the train.”

Dorothy laughed. “You sound like Tony. He thinks twenty minutes is plenty of time to shop, no matter where you happen to be.”

“Brad too,” Vicki added.

“Not for me,” Barb said. “I hope we’ll have at least an hour at one or both of the markets. We had to run through the one in Cusco! I barely had time to buy one of those incredible wooden spoons and take a picture of a dozen different varieties of potatoes. I’m going to print

that photo and frame it. Gorgeous colors! I wish now I'd bought a dozen of those spoons."

Sheila raised her cup. "Here's to mega-shopping today! Even if we have to skip one set of ruins!" She gave Alex a questioning glance.

Alex nodded and smiled. "Okay, ladies. I'll see what I can do to make sure that you actually do drop from your shopping."

Lynn felt his hand on her knee under the table and reached to squeeze his fingers. He gave her such an incredible smile, she wanted to forget breakfast and haul him back up all those steps to his room.

Sharon had finished eating and

moved to an empty table nearby with the laptop. She logged onto to the free wireless and into e-mail. “Do you want to check yours, Lynn?”

“Yes, please.”

“Will do.”

“Anything?” Lynn asked her after a few minutes.

“Yes. There’s a post from your father. They found your mother.”

Happy sighs of relief traveled around the table.

“Actually, your mother called home—from Weatherford, Texas.”

“Weatherford?”

“Just outside Fort Worth on the Interstate. Your father says she realized she had no idea where she was, found

his cell number in her purse, and called him. That was last night. He left immediately with Sam—”

“Their neighbor.”

“—who will drive your mother’s car back to Santa Fe after they’ve all gotten some sleep. They checked into a hotel. She’s all right, but doesn’t remember leaving home or any of the drive. She’s seeing a neurologist as soon as they get home.”

Lynn listened in shock, with her hands clasped in front of her. She released a deep breath. “At least she’s okay. She must have driven all night, without even knowing she was doing it.”

Alex seemed to forget the others were there. He stood and pulled her to

her feet and hugged her. “She’s all right, *Querida*. She’s going to be all right.”

Lynn hugged him, then dabbed at her eyes with her napkin.

Alex saw the bus arrive out front and went to check with Rudolfo. Lynn sat down to finish her tea while Sharon turned off the laptop. The others went to the lobby.

“I should’ve checked e-mail in the room,” Sharon said, “so you could’ve heard the post without an audience.”

“It doesn’t matter. We would’ve told them anyway.”

Sharon hugged her friend. “It’s going to turn out she ate some wonky clams or oysters. Once they work their way through her system, she’ll be her

usual bossy self again, without all the weird stuff.”

“I hope you’re right. Did you answer that post from Dad?”

“I told him how relieved we all are, and that you’ll email him tonight.”

“Thanks.” She pulled a small tube of toothpaste and a toothbrush from her purse. “I’ll be back in a minute. There’s no way I’m climbing all those steps again.”

In the bathroom, she brushed her teeth then splashed her face with water to wake up a little and to wash away some of the tension of the past two days. There was still the question of what the neurologist might find after the tests. They’d be in Machu Picchu by then.

Back in the lobby, a woman sat beside a fairly large display of beautiful tote bags and purses. Lynn wandered over to look at them. “How much are the big ones?”

“Forty-five *soles*.”

Lynn pulled some money out of her purse. “I’ll take two—the red and the blue.”

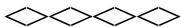
“*Gracias, señorita.*”

Sharon and Sheila arrived about that time and bought several more. The young woman beamed with pleasure at their compliments—and their purchases.

Lynn heard Alex calling from the front door. “Time to go!”

They hurried to the bus and stowed their tote bags on the back seats.

Lynn had a feeling all those bags would be filled with purchases from the Pisac Market, and from the Aguas Calientes market, as well.



El Día de la Independencia! The Sacred Valley was packed with people, coming for the festival! They left the hotel and encountered masses of cars, trucks, and tour buses on the main highway. Then, the bus had to stop. They sat there for a long time. Alex spoke to people walking along the edge of the road, then told everyone, “One lane on the bridge is out. Traffic is stacked up on both sides. It’ll be a while, I’m afraid.”

Vehicles moved slowly the other direction, but their bus couldn’t move at

all. They realized why their lane had stalled. Line-jumpers!

“Look at these people!” Sharon pointed toward cars coming around their bus, inching between them and the traffic in the far lane, then jumping in front of the long line that had been waiting more than half an hour!

“Why aren’t the police here to direct traffic?” Alex wanted to know. He and Rudolfo talked back and forth, then Alex left the bus and walked toward the bridge.

“What can he do?” Barb asked.

Lynn couldn’t see Alex ahead of them. Barb was right. What could he do?

“Look!” Sharon said, pointing at a tour bus coming toward them, so close to

a bus in the opposite lane, there was no way it could get between that bus and the line-jumpers. “They’re going to scrape!”

Everyone moved to the left side of the bus to watch what seemed to be an unavoidable accident!

Rudolfo watched without any sign of worry. Then, Lynn saw why. The driver of the bus in the far lane reached out through the window and pushed with both hands against the passing bus, which had slowed to a crawl. Walking his hands along the side of the other bus, the driver kept it from touching his bus until it was completely past. Then, the driver sat back, as though the incident hadn’t been a big deal!

Lynn was first to laugh. Before

long, they were all laughing. Then, Rudolfo put the bus into gear and began inching forward. They were moving at last!

When they reached the bridge, Lynn spied Alex off to the left side, forcing the line-jumpers to back into a side street! He'd stopped them from jumping in front of the long line! Police officers arrived and Alex gestured, explaining what had happened. Then he jogged back to the bus.

Everyone greeted him with cheers! His only response was a shy grin and a quick shrug.

They'd lost a lot of time, but there wasn't a lot on their schedule for the day. Their destination was the town of

Pisac, the Pisac Ruins, followed by shopping at the Pisac Market.

Thankfully, they didn't encounter any more traffic jams on the way.

Inca Pisac, as the ruins were called, lay at the entrance to the Sacred Valley and were separated into four groups—Pisaqa, Intihuatana, Q'allaqasa, and Kinchiracay. "The Intihuatana group includes the Temple of the Sun, fountains, altars, and volcanic rock that was carved into an Inti," Alex told them, "just as you'll see the Inti Stone at Machu Picchu. Both were used to be able to tell one season from another, according to the position of the sun."

Once again, they saw terraces on the hillsides, still used to grow food.

“How do they water their crops?”

Dorothy asked.

“They don’t have to water them. There is ground water all the way to the top of the mountain,” Alex said. “The biggest jobs are building the terraces, then planting them.”

They drove back into Pisac, where Alex told them they had an hour to shop at the market before returning to the hotel to rest for the remainder of the afternoon.

“The Pisac Market is known for excellent clothing, blankets, mittens, and fabric. They also have jewelry, pottery, and other handmade things. The biggest crowds come to the market on Sunday, so there will be crowds today, especially with the festival going on.”

Lynn wandered from aisle to aisle, amused that Sharon and the others kept Alex busy answering questions about which items were truly Alpaca, and which were imitation. They even asked which t-shirts he liked best.

Finally, the ladies wandered off in different directions, and Alex glanced down the aisles, searching for Lynn. He'd prayed last night that she would get good news today about her mother so she could postpone her flight home for at least two weeks. He knew, if she stayed, there was a chance she might not want to go back to her country for a long time. She was a good daughter to care so much for her mother and father.

There she was. He came up behind

her and put his hands on her waist. As expected, she turned around and put her arms around his neck and kissed him.

“I’ve been waiting all day to have a minute alone with you.”

“Mmmm,” he replied, kissing her neck, loving the fragrance of her hair and her perfume, which reminded him of lemons. “What is that wonderful perfume you wear?”

“Citrus soap.”

He laughed. “Then I will have to get you some citrus perfume to enhance it. You smell wonderful.”

She took a step back and dug in a large shopping bag for a moment. “I bought something for you.” She pulled out a small box and handed it to him.

“So you won’t forget me when I have to go home.”

He opened the box. Inside was a necklace made of small rough stones alternated with irregular chunks of turquoise on a piece of rawhide tied in the back in a knot. “*Querida*, this is beautiful. You spent too much money on me.”

“Not at all. When I saw it, it reminded me of you. You’re polished in some ways, rough in others—a work in progress. The only thing missing from your life is someone to share it with.”

“You know me better than you thought.”

“Yes. I know what’s important to know about you. I still don’t know your

favorite flavor of ice cream—”

“Lúcuma.”

“—or your favorite color—”

“Red, like all the red tile roofs in Cusco.”

“—or whether you have half a dozen black sweatshirts or if you wear the same one every day.”

He laughed out loud at that. “I have more than one. Black absorbs the sunshine and keeps me warm during the winter.”

“I also don’t know if you ever wear necklaces.”

“From time to time. I will wear this one every day. It is beautiful, like you.”

Lynn took the necklace from him,

reached around his neck and fastened it. The shades in the small stones matched his skin tone perfectly. She took her time kissing him. “When you wear it, think of me.”

“Every day. And there’s one other thing you should know about me.”

“What’s that?”

“I play the guitar.”

They wandered through the market hand in hand. Lynn bought several more gifts and added them to the big shopping bag. She found a poncho that would be warm when it snowed in Virginia, a hat with a wide brim, and a headband for it that Alex helped her secure with straight pins he got from the woman who’d sold them to her. She bought an exquisite

chess set for her father, with King Pachacutec and the Inca on one side and Pizarro's army on the other.

"I'll make him promise to be Pachacutec every time. He always wins."

Toward the end of the hour, Alex spent ten minutes rounding everyone up to board the bus. "Supper tonight will be on your own at the hotel," he reminded them.

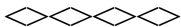
Vicki exclaimed about his necklace. "Were you wearing that all day? I don't remember seeing it."

He caressed the stones. "No, it was a gift." He glanced at Lynn.

She smiled and told everyone, "It's a thank you for the excellent job

he's done being our guide and making our tour of Peru truly memorable."

They added their praise and thanks.



Back at the hotel, everyone appreciated the chance to rest for a few hours, then have a leisurely supper in the restaurant, then get to bed early so they'd be ready for one more day of touring in the Sacred Valley tomorrow, and then Machu Picchu the next day.

Lynn hoped to be able to spend the time with Alex, but he got a call, then told her he had to go back to Cusco to take care of some business. He wouldn't be back until late.

"I'm sorry, *Querida*. I was

looking forward to our having time together this evening.”

“So was I.”

They lingered over a parting kiss, then she watched him leave with Rudolfo in the bus. She went back to their room, feeling strangely empty inside.

Sharon had already closed the drapes and climbed into bed for a nap with the covers pulled up to her chin. “He had to leave?”

“Yes.”

“Did he tell you why?”

“Business in Cusco.”

“That’s a long way to drive, only to drive back tonight.”

“I know.”

Sharon gave her a long, thoughtful look.

“What?”

“You miss him.”

“Of course I do.”

“A lot.”

“Yes, a lot.”

“More than you expected, right?”

Lynn didn't say anything for a minute. “A lot more.”

Chapter 15

The next morning, Lynn got up early and hurried to the restaurant, hoping Alex would be there. He was standing next to the front desk, talking to the clerk. When he turned toward the restaurant and saw her, his smile matched her own.

He went with her to the buffet.

“When did you get back last night?”

“Very late. I didn’t want to disturb you.”

They went to a table near the front windows.

“I missed you.”

He took her hand and kissed it. “I missed you, too, *Querida*. What did you do while we were gone?”

“Slept mostly. Had dinner here. Went to bed early. I didn’t realize how tired I was.” Or how alone I’d feel without you, she wanted to add.

“Malena needed help with the plans for a tour coming up in several months. She’s very good at getting information to people early, so they’ll know what to expect.”

“I’m sorry she had to call you back.”

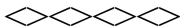
“It isn’t that far. Usually, I stay in Cusco while conducting tours of the Sacred Valley, so I’m used to going back

and forth.”

The others came in eventually and joined them. Lynn sipped a second cup of Coca tea while Alex told everyone where they’d be going today.

“We’re going to Maras first, to see something unique.” He described huge depressions that had been terraced and used to develop seeds. “I’ll tell you more when we get there. Then, we’re going to a most unusual place for lunch, where dancing horses will entertain us.”

Lynn felt his knee against hers and reached under the table for his hand. When his fingers closed around hers, she realized that empty feeling she’d experienced last night was gone.



The trip to Maras was filled with new vistas, including flat plains above tree line, with the mountain nicknamed Verónica in the distance. Lynn took at least half a dozen photos of the mountain, marveling at its snow-capped peaks when they were on the top of another mountain covered with grassland. Their first stop was at Maras.

There were three natural depressions at Maras that had been used by the Inca to cultivate seeds. The depressions had been terraced, much as the sides of the mountains were terraced to create more farmland. The Inca knew they had to increase the amount of food they grew if their empire was going to keep up with the steady increase in

population.

Alex explained, “The tops of these depressions are 400 meters above the valley floor—more than 10,000 feet above sea level. The different levels on the terraces in the depressions are at the same altitude as the plains, jungles, and the land in between. The soils from these depressions came from various parts of Peru, so they could experiment with different crops at different levels in one place. If you’ll look closely at the largest of the depressions, which is almost 500 feet across, you’ll see channels where water flowed to water the seeds on each terrace.”

Lynn didn’t walk all the way to the far depression. The altitude made it

difficult for her to breathe, even though they'd been higher in Cusco. She knew stress was taking a toll on her. She should be relieved to know her mother was home with her father, and obviously not divorcing him, but she still felt tense and unable to relax.

She recognized the source of the tension. She felt it every time she saw Alex's face, every time he smiled at her, every time he touched her hand or kissed her, every time their bodies fit together perfectly when he held her, as though they were made for each other. But there was no way for her to know what her mother's tests would show.

She wandered over to a collection of open huts with thatched roofs to see

what they were selling. She wandered from alcove to alcove, listening to prices and descriptions. By the time she was almost to the end, the others appeared from over the crest of the hill, obviously hot and thirsty from the hike. They'd learned early in the tour to carry bottled water with them everywhere, and several of the ladies had pulled water from a backpack.

When they finally got back on the bus, everyone chattered about the achievement of the Inca in developing seeds for various altitudes.

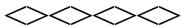
“Their civilization included a great deal of knowledge about the environment,” Alex told them. “Otherwise, how could they have

survived as long as they did?”

“Only a few hundred years,” Lynn mentioned. “Most civilizations with their level of knowledge survived a lot longer.”

“The peak of the Inca Empire lasted only a hundred years or so. During that time, Machu Picchu was built. Tomorrow, you will see it for yourself, room by room.”

His smile pierced her heart. Their time together grew shorter by the hour.



For lunch that day, they were taken to the Wayra Restaurant in the Hotel Sol y Luna in Urubamba, named for the Urubamba River that flowed through the Valley.

“Here, while we eat, we will be entertained by the ‘Caballos de Paso,’ also called the dancing horses.” Alex led them to an outdoor restaurant on a veranda overlooking a wide grassy expanse. Alex pulled out a chair for Lynn on the side facing the “arena” where the horses would be dancing, then sat beside her. She ordered a Coke with ice, while Alex ordered a drink called *chichi morada*, made with purple corn, fruit, cinnamon, cloves, and lime juice. The others had Pisco Sours, water, or soft drinks. Lynn appreciated the cold sting of carbonation.

The hotel was an elegantly beautiful place. Alex assured them the hotel where they’d be staying was

equally beautiful—the Casa Andina Sacred Valley.

When the riders appeared at the far side of the grassy area, they were dressed in elaborate costumes, and their horses wore fancy bridles and saddles and pranced in unison, crisscrossing to the music and creating interesting patterns. Then, a pair of dancers appeared and danced for everyone in native costumes. The woman twirled her enormous skirt and lifted the sides all the way to her head, forming almost a complete circle.

Lynn loved the performance. Afterward, Alex told them, “Richard Gere, the actor, and his wife were once here when I brought a group to lunch. He

asked if he could ride one of the horses and they were happy for him to do it!” He pulled out his phone and showed everyone a photograph he’d taken of the famous actor, wearing a costume similar to those they’d seen on the riders.

“Only someone like Richard Gere could make that request and hear, ‘Yes, of course!’” Vicki said with a laugh.

After lunch, they wandered through the gardens and enjoyed the views across the valley.

That afternoon, they went to a place with a name they all struggled to master. Ollantaytambo. Lynn had to write down the syllables to get them all in the right order. O-yan-tie-tambo. This town lay at the west end of the Sacred

Valley below some ruins that had been used as fortresses to guard the entrance to the lower Urubamba Valley. Terraces had been cut into the mountain all the way to an area Alex explained had been a temple.

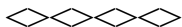
“Where did they get the stone for the buildings?” BJ asked Alex.

“There’s a quarry on the other side of the Urubamba River where thousands of workers cut stones, then moved them to the construction site. When Pizarro’s brother, Hernando, brought troops into the valley, the Inca attacked them from above with arrows, spears, and rocks. They also flooded the plains below, so the Spaniard’s horses couldn’t walk through the mud and water. The

Spaniards actually retreated from Ollantaytambo, which was the only place they'd attacked that they gave up on."

"So it's a special place to the Inca and their ancestors."

"Very much so." Alex looked up at the ruins of the buildings. "Their bravery will never be forgotten."



At the hotel, everyone went up to their rooms to rest for half an hour before meeting for dinner.

Lynn checked her email before they went to the restaurant. There was a post from her father.

"Got something?" Sharon asked.

Lynn scanned the post. "They got

back to Santa Fe, and the neurologist scheduled their appointment for this afternoon. They're doing a CT Scan. They might know something later today, or it could be tomorrow morning."

"What are they looking for?"

Lynn closed the laptop. "Brain tumor."

"That would explain her erratic behavior."

"Also not knowing what she was doing, driving through the night, thinking she needed to divorce Dad..."

"What will they do if they find a tumor?"

"He didn't say."

"So the doctor doesn't think it's Alzheimer's?"

“No, he says some of her symptoms don’t match.”

“That’s good news, at least.”

Lynn didn’t answer. She went to the bathroom to change her clothes and get ready for dinner.

A knock at the door made her smile. Sharon answered it and invited Alex to come in.

“I thought I might escort you and Lynn to dinner.”

“Wonderful! You can make sure I don’t stumble down all those steps.”

Lynn came out smiling. “I’m ready. Sharon, are you going to change clothes?”

“No, I don’t have the energy. You’ll just have to take me as I am. Let’s

go.”

Sharon led the way, with Lynn and Alex behind.

“Any chance for seafood tonight?” Lynn asked him. “I read that the waters of the Pacific off the coast of Peru produce some of the most delicious seafood in the world.”

“That’s true.”

“We haven’t seen much seafood on the menus we’ve chosen from, except at Barranca, and the trout in Cusco. I’d love to have fried fish again.”

“We’ll ask them to bring whatever you want.” He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it with an impish grin.

Dinner was delicious, and Alex didn’t have to persuade the waiter to

bring anything that wasn't already on the menu. Lynn savored the fish. It would take more than a month of eating seafood every day for her to get tired of it.

By the time they finished eating, everyone was ready for bed. Alex kissed Lynn good night at the door and went on to his room. Inside, Lynn took a deep breath and gave Sharon a look that got an immediate response.

"Why are you here?" Sharon asked.

"Excuse me?"

"Why aren't you next door with the love of your life?"

"I haven't said he's the love of my life."

"You don't have to say it. I see it

in your eyes, and his, when you look at each other. Am I going to have to spell this out for you?”

Lynn plopped down on the bed and leaned against the pillows with her hands behind her head. “I’m listening.”

“You’ll probably find out in the morning, before we get on the train that will take us to Machu Picchu, what the neurologist thinks is the problem. If it’s a tumor, then she’ll begin radiation or chemo, which will go on for weeks or maybe months. There won’t be a single thing you can do to help her during that time except sit around and look worried. Your father will be there to do that, and there’s no way he’s going to allow you to quit your job and move to Santa Fe

where you'll only get in the way and drive both of them crazy."

"If that's the good news, I'm not sure I can stand to hear the bad."

"That was the bad news. Here's the good."

"I can't wait."

"Next door is a man who adores you. You had your chance to spend some quality time with him last night but, bless his heart, he knew *your* heart wasn't in it, and he spent that time talking to you, getting to know you better, telling you his favorite color—"

"Red."

"—his favorite dessert—"

"Lúcuma ice cream."

"—and helping you through a

rough night.”

“We held each other.”

“So here you are tonight, in here with me, when you and he may not have more than two more nights together before you have to head three thousand miles—I looked it up—for Virginia, or Santa Fe, which is slightly closer. If you’re hoping to find someone more suited to you than Alex, then you’re setting your sights way too high, my friend.”

Lynn swiped at a tear. “You’re right. You’re always right.”

“Of course I am. Now put on your jammies and get yourself next door so I can get to bed! No need to take your key. I’ll be up early in the morning to get our

luggage packed and ready to head for the place we came to Peru to see.”

Lynn got up from the bed and hugged her dearest friend. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Lynn went into the bathroom, took a shower, and put on her flannel pajamas, which happened to be Alex’s favorite color. When she came out, Sharon was already in bed, writing in her daily journal. “Good night. Enjoy yourself—and Alex!”

“I’m sure I will.”

Lynn eased out the door and down the walkway.

When she got to Alex’s door, she paused for a moment, then knocked lightly. Within a few seconds, the door

opened. When Alex saw her standing there in red pajamas and a matching robe, he reached for her hand and drew her into the room and into his arms, then closed the door.

Chapter 16

They boarded the train at the station in Ollantaytambo the next morning at 9:00 for Aguas Calientes, also known as the Machu Picchu pueblo. Sharon checked e-mail before they left the hotel. A post from Lynn's father said the doctor had ordered an MRI after seeing the CT results. They hadn't heard anything yet. That was hard for Lynn to hear, yet it was a relief, too. At least it wasn't something so obvious that the diagnosis had come quickly.

On the train, Lynn and Alex sat together, facing Vicki and Sheila. Across

the aisle were BJ, Barb, Cathi, and Dorothy, with Sharon behind Lynn, talking to three people who were part of a tour group from Germany. From the sound of the conversation, they were all talking at the same time—absolutely normal for Sharon.

Beautiful scenery flashed by the windows of the train, too fast to be able to take photos, so Lynn just relaxed and enjoyed the ride. At last, they were on their way to the lost city of the Inca—Machu Picchu—the only place the Spaniards hadn't found and destroyed. That meant the city was just as it had existed in the 1500s, except for minor damage from earthquakes and from hordes of tourists through the years.

Alex held her hand, leaning back in the seat, looking sleepy. He pulled his hat over his eyes and fell asleep almost instantly. Vicki took a picture of him and promised to e-mail it to Lynn as soon as they were connected to the Internet. Alex picked up one corner of his hat and gave Lynn a questioning smile.

“Sleep while you can. You’ll be on duty again before you know it.”

He squeezed her hand and replaced his hat.

When they arrived at the train station in Aguas Calientes, a busboy from the Sumaq Hotel, where they’d be staying tonight, met them to take their luggage to the hotel.

Alex escorted them to a bus

terminal where several buses were being boarded, providing transportation to Machu Picchu. Alex found their bus and helped them get on and settled in a group of seats near the front on both sides of the aisle. The commotion of people boarding the buses produced a roar of voices on top of the roar of the engines. Exhaust from idling buses made Lynn cough. Getting onto the bus was a relief. The driver fussed at slow boarders. He had a schedule to keep! They finally left the terminal with a jerk and headed up the mountain.

The road to the city was wide enough for only one bus at a time, but occasionally there would be a pull-out, either on the outside of the road, or the

inside. The buses seemed to be timed perfectly, so one bus would pull over just before another barreled past. The next time, their bus would do the barreling while the oncoming bus pulled over.

“How many times a day to they make this trip?” BJ asked.

“It varies,” Alex told her. “Sometimes, they don’t time it just right because they’re late leaving Aguas Calientes. When that happens, someone has to back up to the closest pull-out. The drivers grumble a lot when that happens.”

Lynn strained to catch the first glimpse of the ruins. When she did, she pointed and told everyone to look! The

glimpse was only that, though, followed in a minute or so by another glimpse. Excitement was building all through the bus as they got closer.

“We’re almost there,” Alex told her.

“A lifelong dream come true.”

“When we get there, we’ll get all of your passports stamped so you’ll have proof you were here. Then, we’ll start the tour of the city. It will be a long time before you and I have time to speak privately again. I want you to know what it meant for me when you came to my room last night.”

“I know. It meant as much to me.”

“Tonight...”

“No need to worry.”

“No matter what you hear about your mother?”

“No matter what. I wouldn’t wake up from this incredible dream for anything.”

He kissed her again quickly as the bus was braking to a stop in a parking lot.

“We’re here!” Sharon shouted.

They left the bus and followed Alex to a small table next to a stone wall with a passport stamp lying on top. No one was around to stamp their passports, so they took turns stamping their own. Then, Alex led the group toward the entrance to the city which was just past a restaurant and a small market jammed with people.

They entered Machu Picchu from the southeast corner of the city. Lynn's first surprise was how large the city was. The classic view gave the impression that the city was small. She hadn't expected the tour to take longer than a couple of hours. But the city was huge! That classic view must have been taken from miles away, from one of the peaks of the Andes to the north. Alex confirmed that was true.

“The tallest peaks around the city are in alignment with the most important part of Machu Picchu—the Intihuatana stone, which is the highest point in the city. We will see it today. It is believed the Inti stone was related to the Inca beliefs that corresponded with the

cosmos—the Milky Way, the constellations, the sun and moon—all of which were related to the Inca religion. I'll tell you more when we reach the stone.”

Alex took them from room to room, pointing out who had lived in each section of the city and showing them, along the way, the intricate system of canals that channeled water from the springs on the mountains on either side of the city, providing water for all the residents of Machu Picchu to drink, and to use for bathing, washing, and cooking. “The spring water collected in beautiful pools, fed by fountains. The engineering of their waterways is something modern engineers have studied to see how they

were built and how effective they were at channeling not only the spring water, but also the torrential rains that fell each year during the rainy season. Engineers agree that the Inca waterway design is brilliant.”

Room by room, section by section, Alex pointed out the incredible construction and stone work. “The Inca had no written language, no iron tools, and did not even have the wheel. And, without this incredible system of canals and terraces to channel rainwater, the city would have washed down the side of the mountain centuries ago. The torrents of rain that fell watered the terraces, which were planted with more than enough food for the 800 to 1000

people who lived here, and the excess flowed into the Urubamba River, which curves around this mountain and is on three sides of Machu Picchu.”

“There have been earthquakes here, right?” BJ asked.

“Yes. The Inca stonework withstood being shaken, while Spanish colonial buildings built on top of Inca structures in Cusco, crumbled. What the Inca built has survived.”

During the day’s tour, Lynn climbed so many stone steps, she wondered why her legs hadn’t given out completely. But she hardly thought about all the steps. Machu Picchu! They were actually here! It wasn’t a dream!

They stopped occasionally to take

photographs or to sit a few minutes and rest. Alex was “on duty” continually, answering dozens of questions from the group. There would be no private time for them while they were here. And no private tour for her.

Lynn wasn't surprised to see hundreds of other people touring the city at the same time, and wished at times they could've had a private tour, just so she wouldn't have to look around so many others at the incredible views within the city and in the mountains all around them.

When they got to the Queen's Room, Lynn was astonished at how small it was. Yet, it was larger than any of the rooms occupied by the common

people who lived in King Pachacutec's version of Camp David. There was no sign of furniture in any of the rooms. Lynn guessed that beds, tables, and chairs had probably been made of wood, which rotted or was carried away over the centuries.

The King's Room was larger, of course, and had a short hallway to an alcove the other rooms didn't have.

"That smaller room was the King's Bathroom," Alex explained. "His room is the only one that has private accommodations."

While they were in the King's Room, Lynn overheard two teenage boys laughing when they heard Alex talk about the King's Bathroom.

“I’ll give you \$20 if you’ll—”

He saw Lynn staring at him with her sternest “teacher look” mixed with a generous amount of disgust. They left the room without another word.

Sharon came over and saw the “look.” “What’s going on?”

“Nothing. Just reminding a couple of morons how to behave.”

Eventually, they came to the Priest’s Room. “This room is larger than the King’s Room or the Queen’s Room!” Vicki said, surprised.

Alex nodded. “The Inca priest was a most important person for the people, and for the king and queen. He conducted all the religious ceremonies held in the city and was an advisor to the

king in all things.”

Their next destination was one of the most important sites in the city. The Intihuatana. The Inti Stone, as it's also called, stood at the highest point in Machu Picchu. Once they'd climbed a staircase with seventy-eight steps, they reached an open courtyard, then the famous stone.

Alex waited until everyone had gathered. “Intihuatana’ means ‘the sun’s hitching post.’ The stone is perfectly aligned with the mountains surrounding the city, and with the sun on the equinoxes and solstices that occur each year. The stone’s shadow is precise on these important days. The corners of the stones are aligned perfectly with north,

south, east and west.

“The Inti Stone was, in a way, an observatory, used to determine the right time to plant crops each year, and to determine the beginning and end of each season. Many people, even today, believe the stone possesses a supernatural power that can be felt when the stone is touched.”

“So,” Barb commented, “that’s why the area around the Stone is roped off? Too many people were climbing on the stone?”

“Yes, and there’s been concern that millions of hands touching the stone will eventually wear it away. A film crew, making an advertisement, once broke into the site and set up their

equipment here. A heavy piece fell on the Inti Stone and broke off a piece. Since then, security has been increased.”

Sharon shook her head. “Morons.”

Lynn couldn’t imagine anyone being so careless. Then she remembered the boys in the King’s Room. Some people simply didn’t understand how precious and sacred this city had been for the Inca, and how precious it still was for everyone who came to the top of this mountain to witness the skill of the Inca builders.

Sharon looked all around before leaning across the rope to touch the stone.

“Sharon! What are you doing?”

“Just wanted to soak up a little

power!”

“Feel anything?”

“Try it yourself!”

Lynn glanced all around. The only one looking was Alex. She leaned over the rope and touched the stone quickly. Alex shook his head—and his finger—at her and smiled.

“I’m definitely feeling something.”

They wound their way across the Central Plaza to the Sacred Rock, which stood at the southern end of the city. Its shape mirrored the peak of the mountain directly behind it. “As you’ll see, this rock sits at the base of Huayna Picchu, the mountain seen in all the photos of Machu Picchu. This stone was essential to the city and was probably used in

religious ceremonies. The fact that it mimics the mountain behind it shows that the Inca were very much in tune with the Andes and all parts of this special place.”

The group gradually made their way back to the bus to tide down the winding road to their hotel in Aguas Calientes. Lynn wished they could have stayed longer at Machu Picchu, but her knees had turned to rubber after all the climbing. On the way to the bus, she paused to take a last look at the city and all they’d seen.

Alex had been leading the group, but retraced his steps and came back to where Lynn stood.

“Is everything all right?”

She turned to him with tears in her eyes.

“*Querida?*”

“Being here is a miracle for me. I wish I didn’t have to leave.”

“We’ll be back tomorrow.”

She circled his waist and held him close for a moment. Alex wished with all his heart she’d been talking about staying in Peru with him. He kissed her gently, tasting her salty tears.

Chapter 17

On the bus, Lynn closed her eyes and pictured all they'd seen, remembering how it felt to actually be at Machu Picchu. Not only did the Inti Stone possess power she imagined she felt in its presence, the entire city was imbued with a power that penetrated her heart and soul. She knew, without any doubt, that no matter how much time passed after her visit, she would be able to recapture the feelings, simply by closing her eyes and remembering the brief time she'd spent there.

Alex finally sat in the seat next to

her, and she reached for his hand.

“What will we see when we come back tomorrow?”

“The best part of all—the whole city. Tomorrow, I’ll take you to the Watch Tower, where you won’t believe your eyes.”

“I can’t imagine it being any better than today.”

“It will be the best part of your tour. Tomorrow, you’ll see what you came to Peru to see. I promise we will experience it together.”

All the way to the hotel, Lynn felt she’d stepped into another world, and indeed, she had. The world of the Inca still held many mysteries, since so many of their temples, shrines, and practices

had been destroyed. Machu Picchu had taken about fifty years to build, during the one hundred years the Inca Empire had reached dominance. Pachacutec ruled a huge area that stretched more than a thousand miles along the Pacific coast of South America. Cusco had been the “capital city” of the Inca Empire, but Machu Picchu reigned as the “crown jewel” of the Inca Empire. It was here that Pachacutec came with the royal family to rest and worship. He knew that eventually the Spanish would find the city and tear it down, just as they’d torn down most everything they’d found in Cusco.

Lynn knew the sorrow and regret Pachacutec must have felt, believing that

the city he'd built would eventually cease to exist. But while it remained unknown to the invaders, it would've been a source of ultimate pride and a place where the Inca ruler could feel close to the mountains and the Earth and to the gods he and his people worshipped. Machu Picchu had remained a spiritual sanctuary since the 1500s. Lynn hoped with all her heart that it would remain a sanctuary forever.

The bus returned to the station in Aguas Calientes, then they went to the Sumac Hotel, where they felt immediately pampered.

They went to their rooms to change for dinner and check e-mail. A post from her father said they were still

waiting to hear what the group of consulting doctors had to say about her mother's test results.

Downstairs, in the restaurant, which was mostly empty except for their group, they agreed they had to have Pisco Sours to celebrate this truly awesome day.

Lynn wished for strawberry, but they had only the traditional Pisco. No matter. It was delicious.

The menu included *cuy*—guinea pig—which Lynn hadn't seen on the menus they'd seen at other restaurants.

"What does *cuy* taste like, Alex?" Dorothy asked.

"It tastes like *cuy*!"

Lynn squeezed his arm. "I think

she's wondering if it tastes like chicken!"

Everyone laughed.

"No, not like chicken. And not like beef or pork, either. Some people think it tastes like rabbit, but *cuy* tastes like *cuy*."

Lynn decided not to order *cuy*, but Sharon did. "I'll give you a bite," she promised.

As always, Lynn enjoyed everything, including the *ceviche* served in a large spoon. She didn't have to check to see what Alex had ordered.

Vicki asked Alex what they'd see tomorrow and mentioned reading in the itinerary about two choices for hiking.

"Actually, you'll have three

choices,” he told everyone. “We’ll go to the Watch Tower, then you may hike to the Inca Bridge, or to the Sun Gate, where you can see not only Machu Picchu from a great distance, but also great views of the grandeur of the Andes.”

“What’s the third choice?” Lynn asked.

“To remain at the Watch Tower while the others go hiking.”

“That sounds good to me.” She gave him a smile with a question in it.

“Which way will you be going?” Barb asked Alex.

“Neither. My friends, who are expert guides, will be going with you on those hikes and answering questions.”

Lynn told Sharon, quietly, “I’m definitely staying at the Watch Tower!”

Vicki asked Alex, “Was this village named for Machu Picchu?”

“No one has ever known the real name of the lost city we now call Machu Picchu. There is a huge book written by the Spanish that mentions Pachacutec and a place called Picchu. The city was named for the village that was closest.

Their food arrived and everyone agreed not to ask more questions to allow Alex to enjoy his dinner and relax a bit from all the questions.

Sharon shared her *cuy* as promised with anyone willing to try it. Lynn had never had rabbit, so she couldn’t say if that’s what it tasted like.

Cathi tried it and made an interesting face before declaring, “It tastes like guinea pig!”

Alex laughed and nodded. “I told you!”

After dinner, Lynn and Alex wandered along the walkway in front of the hotel. His arm around her shoulders felt safe, and the sound of the Urubamba River lulled them into a casual stroll. Lynn had always loved the sound of a stream or river. To her, it sounded like music.

“Any word yet about your mother?”

“Not yet. My dad is trying to stay calm while they wait for the test results. Until then, Mom will be resting while

Dad tries not to think about how their lives have changed.”

Crossing the bridge over the river into the village, they stopped halfway to watch the water rushing beneath them. She leaned against Alex, closed her eyes, and let the sound carry her away from worry and dread of what she might hear tonight.

“You know how much I wish, *Querida*, that I could wave my hands in the air and make your mother well again.”

“I know. It means a lot to me that you care.”

Alex turned her to face him. “I care for you more than I have ever cared for any woman—except my mother, of

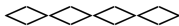
course.”

“Of course.”

Alex’s lips lightly stroked hers, then he took his time kissing her. He stroked her arms and back, and she marveled again at his gentle, soft touch and how he expressed his emotions so accurately with his fingertips—and his lips.

“Come back to the hotel with me,” he whispered, kissing her neck and shoulder.

She caressed his cheek and his lips to entice him back to her mouth. “Yes,” she whispered.



Inside Alex’s room, he’d just closed the door when they heard a

knock.

“Lynn! I got a post from your father! You have to see this!”

Alex opened the door to let Sharon come inside. She was carrying her laptop.

“I hate to interrupt, but you need to see this post!” She placed the computer on the table by the window, then stepped back. “The test results are in.” Sharon’s eyes were moist.

Lynn sat down and read the short post aloud. “Tests showed an aneurysm. They aren’t sure yet about treatment. If the aneurysm ruptures, it could be really serious. The neurologist is consulting with a surgeon and his team tonight to decide whether to treat the aneurysm

with what the doctor called endovascular therapy, or whether they think a craniotomy is necessary to remove it completely. Your mom and I have complete confidence in these doctors. I know everything will be all right, no matter what they decide.’’

Lynn didn’t say anything after reading the post. She didn’t know whether to be relieved that it wasn’t Alzheimer’s, or more concerned because of the imminent danger an aneurysm posed.

Alex leaned down, crossed his arms around her shoulders, and kissed her cheek. “I’m so sorry.”

Sharon was crying now.

Lynn nodded and told Sharon, “I’ll

see you in the morning.”

Alex closed the door after Sharon left and secured the chain. Then, he held Lynn while she cried. He stroked her back, murmured that he hoped everything would be okay, wiped her tears from her cheeks, and kissed her. “I love you.”

She wanted to tell him she loved him, too, but her life was a jumble right now.

“Kiss me, Alex. Kiss me.”

Chapter 18

The next morning, Lynn went back to her room to change clothes for the ride back to Machu Picchu. Sharon was already up and dressed.

“A post just came from your father. They did the surgery last night and removed the aneurysm. Your mother came through the surgery with no problems. She’s sleeping. She’ll be in the ICU for a day or two, then move to a regular room if everything goes the way they expect.”

Lynn didn’t say anything. She just got into the shower and let the hot water wash away some of her fear. Her mother

had made it through the surgery. The aneurysm was gone. Her chances for a full recovery had improved immeasurably, but they wouldn't have a complete prognosis for a good while.

She had to do what her mother had always suggested when she had a problem that had overwhelmed her. She had to “take two steps back in her mind” so she could see the situation objectively and positively.

They had Coca tea and something light at the breakfast buffet since they'd be having an early lunch at Machu Picchu before their last day of touring—the best day of the tour, according to Alex. No better way for Lynn to remain “two steps back” today. Then, they'd

ride the train back to Ollantaytambo, then go back to Cusco.

They boarded the bus. Alex was up front, talking to the driver. When she passed him, she let her fingers trail along his lower back, eliciting a smile from him. In a few minutes, he sat next to her and took her hand.

“Shouldn’t the bus have left by now?”

“One of the other buses broke down on the way up. The schedule is delayed until they can get that bus out of the way.”

“Will it be very long?”

“Not long. This happens sometimes. They’ll get it to the nearest pull-out and do the repairs there. It’s

still early, so the buses haven't started coming back down the mountain yet." He leaned closer and whispered, "You look beautiful this morning."

"So do you!"

"When you wear blue, it makes your eyes look bluer. They look like the skies over Machu Picchu."

It wasn't more than ten minutes before the bus pulled out.

"See? Not long. What have you heard this morning?"

Lynn told him about the surgery. "Mom is in the Intensive Care Unit and will be there a day or two. There's a good chance she'll be all right, unless there are complications."

"Your father has my cell phone

number if he has more news for you. Or, you may call him any time you wish.”

When they reached Machu Picchu, before hiking to the Watch Tower, they went into the restaurant near the entrance. It was, without surprise, a buffet, and, also without surprise, Alex ladled *ceviche* onto his plate. When he sat down at the table, he took a bite then said, “They fixed it with quinoa! I’ve never had it fixed that way before. It’s good!”

Lynn tried not to laugh but couldn’t help herself. “I didn’t think there could be a single way to fix *ceviche* that you hadn’t tried! We need to put your picture in the newspaper with the headline, ‘Alex Vereau Discovers New Way to

Fix *Ceviche!*””

He laughed and even blushed a little.

The restaurant was crowded with tourists, and noisy with excited children and adults. It wasn't difficult to spot them, with cameras hanging around their necks, huge purses or tote bags, and floppy-brimmed hats, some of them garish with splashes of bright colors that didn't match their clothes. Lynn thought about her own hat, which she'd bought at the market. It looked more like an Indiana Jones hat than one a tourist would wear. At least she didn't think it looked touristy. It reminded her of Alex's white straw hat.

After they'd eaten, Alex gathered

the group. They entered the city the same way as before, but headed for a long flight of steps that meant a strenuous hike to the Watch Tower overlooking the city. From there, guards would've been able to see down the mountain on both sides of Machu Picchu to spy anyone approaching, long before they could reach the city. Lynn wondered how many stone steps she'd climbed since arriving in Peru. It had to be thousands, without exaggeration. Some of these, though, were the tallest she could remember, and most of the way there were no hand rails. The only thing to hold onto was the vegetation on the inside of the never-ending steps.

“Alex, I’m not sure I can make it

to the top. My legs are rubbery.”

“Rest whenever you need to, *mi amor*. I won’t let you stumble or fall.”

She stopped to catch her breath.

“Your name for me has changed.”

“Yes. *Querida* means ‘sweetheart.’ But ‘*mi amor*’ means ‘my love.’ My dearest love. That’s what you’ve come to be for me.”

“I hardly know what to say.”

“There’s no need to say anything.”
He kissed her, then asked, “Are you ready to climb a bit farther?”

“Sure.” She released a sigh and tackled the steps again, with Alex’s hand on her elbow to steady her. She had to rest several more times before they made it to the top, where the others were

waiting, gazing in awe at the incredible view.

Lynn turned to face the city. Tears came when she realized she was looking at the “classic view,” but not from a great distance. From where they were standing, she felt she was almost close enough to touch the walls, rooms, and terraces that made up the lost city of the Inca.

“Oh, my...”

“Every time I see it, my heart catches a little. Spectacular.”

“This is why I came to Peru—to see the city where the Inca lived and walked and loved, surrounded by these incredible mountains.”

“I think there’s another reason you

came to Peru.”

She glanced at him. “And what is that?”

“To meet me, of course!” Another kiss. “And to fall in love.” He excused himself to check on the others.

“What have I gotten myself into?” she whispered, then smiled. Something wonderful.

Lynn spied a stone bench with only a few feet between it and a drop-off to the level about thirty feet below. She wandered over and sat down, still enamored with the sight of the famous city. She knew she could sit here the rest of the day and be perfectly happy not to go anywhere else.

Vicki called her to come for a

group photo with the city in the background. Lynn complied happily, knowing she would print and frame the photograph so she could remember this time forever, and the people who had shared the experience with her.

Alex stood off to the side.

Sharon grabbed him by the arm. “No, you don’t! You have to be in this picture, too! Without you, we wouldn’t be here! Let’s see. Who should you stand by? How about Lynn?”

They all smiled at his bashful expression and the blush that crept across his cheeks.

The guide who would take some of them to the Sun Gate took their picture over and over, using all their cameras,

including the one on Alex's phone.

Alex's arm around her waist felt wonderful to Lynn. Sadly, she'd begun counting the hours until she'd have to fly home. Tonight, they'd go back to Cusco to the hotel where they'd stayed before—where she and Alex had danced around the fountain. Then, tomorrow, they'd fly to Lima, board the plane for Houston, then spend a layover before boarding the plane for Virginia. Or for Santa Fe...

After the photos were taken, the group divided for the different hikes. Lynn and Alex were the only ones staying at the Watch Tower. With hundreds of people milling around on this upper level, and hundreds more

below in the city, Lynn marveled at her feeling of being alone in the city, of being the only one there to experience what she was seeing. It had become easy to mute all the voices, the laughter and cries of children, and the sounds of endless photographs being taken. Thank goodness she'd found a place where no one would block her view of the city below.

When she was able to take her eyes off Huayna Picchu, the mountain at the far end of the city, she turned slowly, taking in the panorama of the Andes peaks, soaring to incredible heights from the Urubamba River valley far below. The vegetation-covered peaks didn't seem real, standing verdantly green

against an impossibly clear blue sky. Yet she knew they were real because she could feel their presence, as though they were alive, comforting and reassuring her while she waited for news about her mother, and while she thought sadly about the rapidly approaching time when she'd have to tell Alex good-bye.



After the rest of the group had left for their hikes, Alex made his way to where Lynn was sitting and sat on the opposite side of the stone bench. It reminded her of the arrangement of a Victorian “courting couch,” where a young lady sat on one side of the S-shaped settee, while the young man courting her sat on the other side.

He trailed one finger down her arm, creating a shiver of pleasure.

“What are you thinking about?”

“How long I’ve waited to sit here and see what I’m seeing now.” She turned toward him. “I was also thinking about you.”

He seemed really pleased with that. He pulled out his cell phone.

“Would you like to e-mail your father and see if he has any news?”

“Yes! That would be wonderful!” She gave him the address. “Please tell him I’m thinking about both of them, hoping for the best. Also, tell him we’re at Machu Picchu, and I’m taking lots of pictures. They’ll be thrilled to know where we are.”

Alex sent the post then put his phone back into his pocket.

“Will you’ll go to Santa Fe to be with your mother during her treatment?”

“Probably. She’ll tell me not to come, though.”

“Why would she tell you that?”

“Because she’s a strong-willed woman, and she won’t want me to ‘fuss over her.’”

“What about your father? Will he need you there during the treatments?”

Lynn thought about it. “Maybe. He knows my mother better than anyone, and he knows we haven’t always gotten along well. He might think it best if I didn’t come.”

“My mother and my sister who

lives in Lima don't get along well, either. My sister thinks my mother shouldn't tell her what to do, and my mother thinks she should keep taking care of my sister, even though she's twenty-seven years old."

"That sounds a lot like my mom."

"Sometimes, though, a child has to live her own life the way she wants to live it, and not the way her mother thinks is best. That's what I told my sister, anyway."

"What's her name?"

"Connie."

"And the others?"

"Henry, Joe, Robert, and Kathy."

Lynn knew their names were probably Consuela, Enrique, José,

Roberto, Katarina—and Alejandro.
Beautiful names.

“Are you the eldest, youngest, or
in the middle?”

“In the middle. My brothers are
older. My sisters younger. Connie has
always wanted to leave home and live
on her own. But not me. I still live close
to my mother, to take care of her when
she’ll allow it.”

“You’re a good son.”

“I try to be. And you’re a good
daughter. Sometimes, it’s best not to
crowd your mother too much. If I go by
to see my mother every day, she starts to
worry there’s something wrong, and I’m
not telling her what it is. But if I don’t go
by often enough, she thinks the same

thing.” He laughed. “She’s a dear, sweet, funny, fussy woman, my mama.”

“I’d love to meet her.” Lynn immediately wished she hadn’t said that because it could give Alex the wrong idea.

“If we decide to get married, will I need to ask your father for his permission?”

She felt her face flush. “No. I would decide for myself.”

His kiss came so quickly and was so passionate, it took her breath away.

“This isn’t exactly the best place...” she said softly when they parted.

“I know.” He looked down shyly, then away. “When will you be able to

decide if you can stay in Peru a while longer?”

“I don’t know.”

He looked into her eyes. “Do you want to stay with me, so we can get to know each other better?”

She sighed. “I’d like that very much.”

His grin widened, then he laughed. “You have no idea how happy I am to hear that.”

His phone pinged. “An e-mail.” He checked quickly. “It’s from your father.” He handed her the phone without reading the post.

She read the post then told Alex, “Mom is still sleeping after the surgery. He wants me to enjoy the rest of the tour.

He'll let me know how she's doing tonight." She squeezed her eyes shut but couldn't stop the tears.

Alex came around to the other side of the bench so he could sit next to her and hold her close.



Those who had hiked to the Inca Bridge returned first. Alex went to talk to the guide.

"Wow! What a hike!" Sharon sat down next to Lynn. "Have you been here the whole time?"

"Yes. We've been talking." She hesitated. "I got a post from Dad on Alex's phone. Mom is still in the ICU. They'll be watching her closely for the next twenty-four hours."

Sharon's expression changed immediately. "So what does this mean for you and—"

"Dad told me to enjoy the rest of the tour."

Sharon nodded. "We'll be back in Cusco tonight"

"Yes, and back to Lima in the morning."

"So you're going back?"

"What else can I do? As soon as we get back to Virginia, I'll have to arrange a flight to Santa Fe."

"You could change your flight from Houston to Santa Fe instead."

"I guess I could. It would certainly be less expensive to pay the fee than to pay for another flight booked less than

two weeks ahead of time.” She stood and walked away a few paces, then came back and sat down again. “I just wish they could tell us what’s happening!”

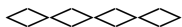
“Maybe we’ll hear some really good news tonight. That she’s awake and trying to get out of bed and clean something.”

“Maybe.”

“You don’t have to live through this alone. We’re all here for you. So is Alex.”

“Tomorrow, we’ll leave. I may never see him again.”

“Positive thoughts, remember?”



The group who’d gone to the Sun

Gate returned a while later, elated, but extremely tired.

Vicki and Sheila looked like they'd been on a super roller coaster.

"The view from the Sun Gate is extraordinary!" Vicki said. "I tried to imagine what it would've been like, approaching Machu Picchu on the Inca Trail from that gate in the mountains for the first time. Astonishing! It's so surreal, it would be like entering Heaven."

Sheila agreed. "It looks exactly like the pictures! I like this up-close view a lot better, though. Wow. Is that ever beautiful!"

"I couldn't agree more." Lynn tried to imprint the view in her mind.

She had a dozen photographs now, but closing her eyes and remembering actually being here would always be better. Photographs couldn't capture the full majesty of the surrounding mountains, or the feeling of being almost on top of the city below.

Alex came up beside them. "It's almost time to start back. Take lots of pictures in the next ten minutes!"

Lynn's chest felt tight at the thought of leaving this magical place. Somehow, she had to come back someday.

On the way down, Lynn had no difficulty keeping up with the group or getting her legs to cooperate. No rubbery knees this time.

When they reached the bus, she got on sadly. When Alex sat down next to her, he slipped his arm around her shoulders.

“We will come back, *Amor*. You will see. There’s no need to be sad about leaving. I promise we will come back—just the two of us—and we can sit on the bench the whole day, if that’s what you want.” He brushed the hair back from her face and kissed her cheek. “I’ll bring cushions for us to sit on.”

Lynn didn’t answer. She couldn’t. She wanted to believe him...

Chapter 19

In the village, they boarded the train to return to Ollantaytambo.

Everyone in the group contributed money to two envelopes—one for Alex and another for Rudolfo—their tips to thank them for such an excellent job on the tour. The fat envelopes were sealed and names written on the front. Sharon handed Rudolfo's envelope to him and he bowed, grinned, and said, "*Muchas gracias, Señoritas!*"

Lynn handed the other envelope to Alex, which was even fatter, since he'd been their most impressive guide.

Alex said nothing when he took the

envelope. Instead, he stood in the aisle among the ladies, held the envelope in front of him, then kissed it noisily! Everyone laughed and clapped!

He tucked the envelope into his pocket, then sat down next to Lynn again, still grinning and nodding his appreciation.

Lynn snuggled against him with her arm beneath his and their fingers laced, and rested her head on his shoulder on the way back. Her thoughts tangled in her mind—her mother's surgery, what she could be facing now, and how much she wished her parents could meet Alex. She smiled when those thoughts changed to memories of seeing him the first time in Lima at the hotel,

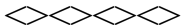
peering at him through the closing elevator doors, the first time he kissed her hand, and how she'd grown to love him in only a few days. They'd progressed from holding hands to making love since she'd arrived in Peru. Could it be infatuation instead of love? Was it nothing more than a vacation fling? She frowned. No, not a fling. Much more. Her feelings—her love—for Alex had grown deeper every day, bringing her joy and happiness she'd never known. He'd become part of her. She looked up at him and found a quizzical expression on his face.

“What is it, *Amor*? What are you thinking?”

“How much I love you.”

Tears appeared in his beautiful eyes. He kissed her forehead before closing his eyes and stroking her hand, squeezing her fingers, and leaning farther toward her. “One more night...” he whispered.

One more night...



In Ollantaytambo, they boarded the tour bus to drive back to Cusco. Lynn sat in her usual place, feeling lonely, as though part of her were missing. Alex sat up front. She noticed he looked rather lonely, too, but, of course, he was “on duty” again, pointing out places they passed and answering more questions on the way back to Cusco. Even though they’d become “special friends,” he’d

never neglected his duties as their guide.

They arrived at the Costa del Sol just before dark. Some had different rooms from their previous stay, but Sharon and Lynn were assigned to the same room as before. Lynn watched to see where Alex was staying, but he lingered in the lobby after she and Sharon left to go upstairs.

They took showers—a necessity after all those stone steps!—and dressed in the clothes they’d brought for “dressing up.” Lynn wore her black jeans with the “sparklies” again, but chose a turquoise knit top with long sleeves this time. When she’d bought the necklace for Alex, she hadn’t shown him—or anyone else—the matching

necklace she'd bought for herself. She put it on, and it brought her a wave of happiness, seeing how the turquoise stones matched the top.

Lynn had worn her hair pulled back into a long ponytail every day, with her hat on top to shade her face from the sun. The sunburn she'd brought back from Caral had healed and turned into a lovely tan. After shampooing her hair in the shower, she used the dryer to fluff her hair over her shoulders. This would be her last night with Alex. She wanted to look special for him.

She and Sharon went downstairs, straight to the urn of hot water and the bowl of Coca leaves in the lobby. They were back at an altitude of 11,000 feet,

which sapped energy quicker than climbing a thousand stone steps.

She still didn't see Alex. He must still be in his room. But then, he appeared at the door of the hotel leading to the street. He'd had a shower, too, and fluffed his thick black hair, just as she'd fluffed hers. He wasn't wearing his hat. He also wasn't wearing his "tour guide clothes." His jeans were darker than those he'd worn during the day, and his white shirt was unbuttoned several inches from his throat.

"Ladies, you look very beautiful." He gave them both a kiss on the cheek. "I really love your necklace, *Amor*. A wonderful surprise."

"I didn't see you go to your room,"

Lynn said softly.

“I don’t have a room here this time,” he admitted. “I went home. That’s where I’ll be tonight.”

For him, the tour was over.

“Will we see you tomorrow?”

“Of course. I couldn’t let you leave without saying good-bye.”

His words pierced her heart.

The others came down, declaring they had to have cheeseburgers and fries, Peruvian-style, to compare to burgers in Virginia.

Lynn gave Alex an impish grin. “Know what I’d like to have tonight? Those incredible shrimp skewers at the Museo del Pisco. And a strawberry Pisco Sour. Or two!”

They all agreed that sounded better than burgers! They walked two blocks to the plaza, then across to the Museo where Sergio was delighted to see them again. He escorted them to the basement to the same oblong couches with the table in the center where they'd sat the first time.

Lynn motioned to Sergio to take her order first. "I want five skewers of shrimp."

"Five?"

"No, make it six, so I can share. I may want more in a little while."

"Whatever you say! Shall I bring you a strawberry Pisco Sour?"

"Yes, please!"

Sergio took orders from the others,

who studied a menu before ordering a dozen different tapas to share, including shrimp skewers.

Sharon ordered two skewers for herself. “I can’t trust her to share. She loves shrimp more than anyone I’ve ever known!”

Spread out around the table, their conversation got louder and louder, thanks to the vivacious live music filtering down the stairs from the main floor. Alex sat in the curve of the padded couch with Lynn leaning back against him and his arms around her.

Lynn appreciated so much how accepting everyone had been about her relationship with Alex. Whenever the others saw the two of them together,

their expressions displayed only delight and approval. If any of them had come to Peru expecting a fling with their guide—other than Sharon, of course—they'd given up on the idea almost immediately.

Was Lynn ready for commitment? The more she thought about being with Alex in a committed relationship—or married, as he'd hinted earlier—the more she loved the idea of being with someone she could truly count on, who loved her for who she was, who shared her love of history and sharing history with others, and who clearly loved his mother!

Lynn's thoughts left the group and centered on her parents for a moment, and how her mother might face a normal

future again, if only... She banished those thoughts. Tonight she would celebrate! They'd come to Peru not knowing what to expect, and tomorrow they'd leave with memories that would enrich their lives forever.

Alex fingered Lynn's necklace lovingly. Wearing matching necklaces reminded her of college, when couples who weren't ready to be engaged became "dropped." A "drop" was a necklace with a pendant bearing the logo of the school. "Dropped" meant "engaged to be engaged." Lynn loved the idea that she and Alex had actually gotten close to making that big decision. But living thousands of miles apart made it impossible—another thought she put

aside in favor of celebration.

Alex reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. “E-mail,” he said, glancing at the name of the sender.

“From your father.” He handed her the phone.

Lynn couldn’t hide what she felt when she read the post.

Sharon and the others had stopped chattering and fallen silent. “What does he say?”

“Mom hasn’t responded the way they’d hoped after the surgery. Dad will let me know in the morning if there’s been any change. It could be another twenty-four hours before they’ll know for sure.” She handed the phone back to Alex and took a deep breath with her

eyes closed, taking “two steps back.”

“So, we have to keep celebrating this amazing tour we’ve just completed!” Sharon declared. “Your mom would never forgive us if we didn’t have one more Pisco Sour and drink to her recovery.” She reached for her glass and drank the rest. “Sergio! Bring me another! And another strawberry for my friend!”

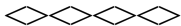
Lynn drained her glass then told Sergio, “Fill ‘er up!”

Sergio asked the others if they also wanted refills, which several did, then went up the stairs happily to fetch them.

Alex pulled Lynn closer and whispered, “You are very brave, *Amor*. Your mother would be proud.”

“I just have to keep my mind occupied with positive, happy thoughts.”

Alex raised her hand to his lips, then gave her a sweet smile. “I think I can help you with that.”



Laughing and talking on the way back to the hotel, everyone agreed they'd chosen the perfect way to say good-bye to Cusco and to all the wonderful places they'd been and sights they'd seen. They were going home with bags of gifts, hundreds of memories, and thousands of photographs, which they promised to share with each other.

Alex and Lynn walked near the back of the group, holding hands, bumping their shoulders occasionally,

and stealing kisses even when they knew the others might be looking.

Once they were back in the hotel, the others disappeared quickly, knowing they wouldn't get nearly enough sleep to get them through the long day of travel ahead of them. They might actually be able to sleep on the flight from Lima to Houston.

Sharon was the last to head upstairs, but before she left, she pulled Lynn off to the side. "I'm spending the night in Barb and BJ's room tonight. Our room is all yours." She smiled at Alex over Lynn's shoulder.

"Are you sure?"

"Their room has two beds. They were happy to let me bunk with them.

Give me five minutes to get my stuff from our room...”

Lynn smiled her thanks, then returned to where Alex was standing by the door, getting ready to leave.

“You don’t have to go home,” she told him.

“I was hoping you’d come with me.”

“Sharon won’t be in our room tonight.”

His eyes—and his smile—widened. “Are you sure?”

“A gift to us.”

They waited another ten minutes, wandering through the courtyard where they’d danced, and where they’d kissed the first time. Then, they made their way

up the wide stone staircase to the second floor, then around to Lynn's room. She unlocked the door, and they slipped inside. Sharon had turned down the covers—expertly, Lynn thought—and left some Pisco-flavored chocolates on the pillow. She'd stashed all of her clothes and other stuff in her suitcases in the closet so the room looked perfectly beautiful.

“Alex, I need to tell you something.”

He took off his jacket and laid it neatly on the back of the chair by the dresser. “I hope it is something happy.”

“I can't stay in Cusco with you.”

He ducked his head and looked away. “I understand.” He gathered her

into his arms, kissed her hair, her temples, her lips.

“Let me finish,” she told him gently. They sat on the edge of the bed. “I came here to tour Peru, to see Cusco and Machu Picchu, to gather information and photographs to make my unit on the Inca come alive for my students.”

“You are an excellent teacher.”

“I didn’t expect to fall in love.”

His eyes widened.

“I have no idea what will be expected of me once I get home. So the choice about whether or not I can stay has been made for me, simply because the future is completely unknown to me right now. And there’s very little chance that my mother will wake up and be able

to get on with her life as it was before.”

Alex nodded.

“I’ve loved meeting you, getting to know you, and...falling in love with you.”

He brought her hands to his lips.

“I love you, Alex. I want to be with you more than anything. But I can’t right now.”

“You could see your mother, then come back.”

“I don’t know that for sure. I may not know for months. I can’t ask you to wait for me. I may not be able to come back for a long time, and that isn’t fair to you.”

“I have been half a man until you came into my life. But now I have found

the best part of myself, someone who loves all the things I love—Peru, Cusco, Machu Picchu, the history of my country, and sharing what I have learned with others. How can I say good-bye to the best part of myself?”

“I feel the same way, but I have to leave tomorrow. I can’t ask you to wait for me.”

“You are breaking my heart. You are my dearest love. When you leave, you will be taking my broken heart with you.”

Their tears mingled as they kissed. Once again, she couldn’t hold him close enough or kiss him passionately enough, or long enough. On this, their last night together, Lynn released all her love for

Alex and forgot about tomorrow or the days to come. For tonight only, she was his, and he was hers, and they could pretend that the future held only love for them both.

Chapter 20

Alex eased out of bed the next morning just after six o'clock, put on his clothes, and walked quietly toward the door. He didn't want anyone to see him leave, or his pain and sadness, knowing he might never again be able to hold her or love her the way he'd loved her last night. All the hesitation he'd sensed in her before had been replaced with complete surrender of her feelings for him. She loved him! But now, he had to tell her good-bye.

“Alex, don't go.”

He turned and saw her propped on one elbow, motioning to him to come

back to the bed. How could he say no?

“I must go, my love.”

“Not yet.” She reached for him and eased over to make room for him to lie next to her once more.

“It’s almost dawn. I can’t let anyone see me—”

“They already know. Please, hold me again.”

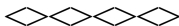
He couldn’t refuse her anything. He wished more than anything that he could take her home with him and love her with everything in his heart and soul for the rest of their lives. But they had only a few minutes left.

“I’m sorry,” she told him again. “I’m so sorry. I never should’ve let any of this happen. I’ve hurt you so much.”

“Hush, *mi amor*. You haven’t hurt me. You’ve made me whole. And someday, you’ll come back to me, and I’ll be waiting. If necessary, I’ll wait forever.”

She pressed her face against his chest, then kissed him again, wanting him again. Sounds of people closing doors and walking past the room made that impossible.

“I must go. Taking you to the airport and watching you get on the plane and fly away, out of my life, might be more than I could bear. Tell me good-bye now, my love. Let this be our final memory. Kiss me, Lynn. Kiss me good-bye.”



A few minutes later, Sharon let herself into the room. She didn't say anything, just went to the bathroom and closed the door before turning on the light.

Lynn made herself get up.

Sharon came out. "I saw him leave. I've never seen anyone so sad."

"We said good-bye. He won't be going with us to the airport."

"No new messages from your father."

"It's two hours earlier in New Mexico."

"We may not hear from him until we get to Lima."

"I know." Lynn went into the bathroom and closed the door. She

turned on the shower then washed her face in cold water at the sink while the room filled with fragrant steam. When she looked into the mirror, all she could see was regret.

They stacked their luggage by the door at seven-thirty, and two busboys came to load it on the bus. They followed, fixed a cup of tea in the lobby, and were surprised to see Malena come in to accompany them to the airport. Rudolfo helped load the luggage while Malena took care of checking everyone out of the hotel.

Sharon put on a smile and asked Malena, “Will Alex be going with us to the airport?”

“No, he’s on vacation for the next

two weeks. He's done four tours without a break. I may give him three weeks before I call him to do another one."

At the front door, the two young women who had begged Lynn to buy something from them when they were in Cusco before, were peeking inside.

"Miss! You promised to buy from me!"

"No, from me!"

"I'll buy from both of you!" Lynn went outside and looked at all the beautiful silver pendants, earrings, and rings they displayed on what seemed to be thick cardboard covered in blue velvet. Lynn chose four pendants from each girl's selection, so she could give one each to the seven ladies in the group,

plus one for herself, and paid them with the last of the *soles* in her purse.

“Thank you, Miss! Thank you!”

Lynn scanned the street both directions, but among all the people walking down the sidewalks, she saw no one who looked like Alex.

Malena and the others came outside and were instantly besieged by the two girls, but they had to get to the airport to go through security and check in for their flight, so Malena told them to “Move on!” and they did.

On the bus, the front seat was taken by Malena. Once they were away from the hotel, she stood, holding onto the seats on either side of the aisle, and asked, “Did you enjoy your stay in

Peru?" She nodded at all the positive responses. "Was Alex a good guide for you?" More positive responses. "Everyone loves Alex. He knows everything there is to know about Cusco and the Sacred Valley and Machu Picchu!"

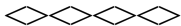
Lynn added in her mind, *Alex knows everything about how to make me happy...*



At the Cusco Airport, they told Malena and Rudolfo good-bye and went inside. Their luggage was checked through to Lima where Malena said there would be escorts waiting to make sure it all was transferred to their flight to Houston. When Lynn left the bus, she

couldn't help searching the crowds to see if Alex had changed his mind and come to tell her good-bye again. But he wasn't there.

They all had carry-on luggage that barely complied with the maximum size allowed, thanks to having to put some of their purchases into their carry-ons. Sharon carried the laptop and intended to get online in the terminal before they boarded the plane. They went through customs and security to the gate where they'd have to wait half an hour before time to board. Sharon checked e-mail over and over. Still nothing.



Alex watched the group leave the bus at the airport. He'd vowed he

wouldn't see her again this morning before she left, but he couldn't stay away. She was the last one to leave the bus. Her hair shone in the sun like gold, and he could see the sadness on her face. She may have gotten bad news about her mother. She hadn't changed her mind about leaving, so the news couldn't have been good.

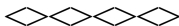
She searched the crowd. Looking for him? He had to remind himself again that going to her would only mean having to say good-bye again, and that was something he wasn't sure his heart could survive.

They all went into the terminal. His last glimpse of her came when she stopped at the door and searched again.

He turned away, so she wouldn't recognize him.

After she'd gone inside, he made his way to the area nearest the runway and the terminal, where the planes about to depart were parked. Three people sat on a bench near the chain link fence, talking and laughing, pointing toward a plane that was just landing. They left the bench and went into the terminal.

Alex sat down to wait. As much as it hurt, he had to watch her plane take off. He would imagine her looking out one of the windows, still searching for him. He would remember holding her, loving her, becoming part of her, and hope he could remember without crying.



Their flight was called, and boarding began. Sharon tried e-mail once more while they were standing in line to board.

“The wireless signal right here isn’t great, and I don’t think we’ll be able to check again once we’re on board. I’ll wait here and keep trying.” She handed Lynn her tote bag. “Take this for me. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Don’t wait too long! Tell them what you’re doing so they’ll know you’re here for the flight.”

“I will.” Sharon went to the desk. Barb touched Lynn’s arm. “Any news yet?”

“Not yet.”

“We’re all praying for good

news!”

“I know. Thanks.”

Lynn watched Sharon at the desk. The attendant pointed toward an area near the gate, next to a shop. Sharon nodded, smiled, and headed for that area. Lynn entered the jetway and walked slowly toward the plane. Each step became harder, the closer she got to the doorway of the plane that would take her back to Lima, back to overcast skies and fog. Back to a city without sunshine. Winter in Lima matched her sorrow and her regret at having to leave the sunshine of Cusco, and the man she loved.

The flight attendant checked Lynn's boarding pass and gave her instructions on how to get to her seat,

about a third of the way back on the right side. She knew Sharon was sitting next to her, on the aisle. Lynn eventually found her seat by the window and stowed her carry-on and Sharon's under the seats in front of them. Then, she stared out the window.

A chain link fence divided the parking lot and the area outside where planes arrived and departed the terminal. Beyond the fence, two people sat on a bench. One of them looked a little like Alex, but the bench was too far away to see him clearly. It couldn't be him, could it? If he'd come to the airport, why hadn't he seen them before they went through security to the gate?

Just then, Sharon came bounding

into the plane, gasping for breath as though she'd run all the way from the terminal. She held the laptop under one arm. The minute she entered the plane, she yelled, "Lynn! She's okay! Your mother is okay!"

Lynn couldn't believe it! She stood and waved to Sharon who pushed her way past three people in the aisle.

"I got a post from your father! She's awake, hungry, and complaining about all the attention she's getting! She's okay! Your father is ecstatic! He told you, "Be happy! We'll see you at Christmas! You get to make the dressing this year!"

Lynn couldn't breathe. Relief flooded through her. All right. She was

all right! Then she remembered...

She sat down and peered out the window at the bench. The man was getting up, walking toward the fence. He wore a hat. A white hat.

Lynn grabbed her purse. "Carry-ons are under the seats!" She hugged Sharon. "I'll call you as soon as I can!" She ran toward the front of the plane.

The flight attendant was reaching for the door to seal it.

"I have to get off the plane!
Please! Let me get off!"

"But we're ready to take off!"

"I can't leave! You have to let me off the plane!"

"Are you ill? Are you having chest pains?"

“No! I’m fine! I just can’t leave Cusco!”

The attendant checked with another attendant, then nodded and pushed the door open just far enough for Lynn to get back into the jetway. She ran for the gate, then down the long hallway to the front of the airport and outside. The difference between the dark interior and the brilliant sunshine outside was enough to blind her for a few seconds, but she couldn’t wait for her eyes to adjust to the brightness. She shaded her eyes with one hand and searched for the bench near the fence. There it was! She ran, her lungs burning from lack of oxygen, but still she ran. When she got to the bench, it was empty, and no one

stood next to the fence. She stopped, gasping for breath. She'd find him. Somehow, she had to find him.

“Lynn?”

She whirled around. “Alex?”

Then he was there, holding her, kissing her, laughing, crying, pulling her closer and closer, then looking into her eyes.

“Is your mother all right?”

“Yes! She's going to be okay. My father told me...” She started to laugh.

“What? What did he say?”

“He said he'd see us at Christmas.”

“Christmas?”

“He told me to be happy. I can't be happy without you.”

Alex tilted his head back and laughed, then he let out a whoop that had everyone around them pointing and laughing. Some were cheering.

“I love you, Alex. I don’t ever want to leave you.”

“Then you must marry me, my love. Say yes, then kiss me, Lynn.”

With more love than she ever dreamed, she kissed him first, then whispered, “Yes.”

