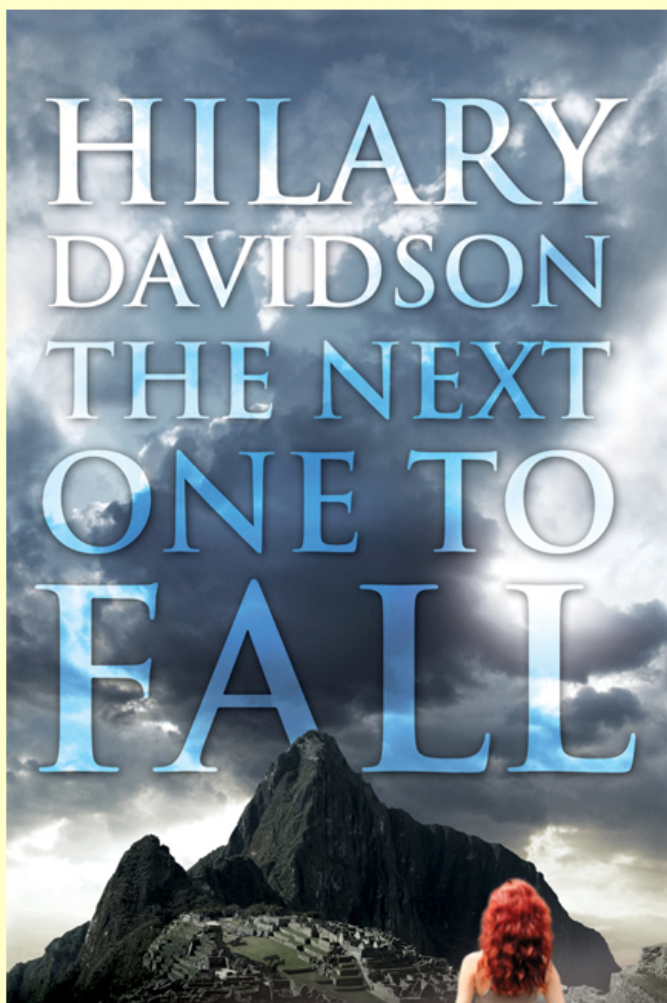


**READ IT FIRST**



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THE NEXT ONE TO FALL

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Standing at the edge of the mountain, I imagined what it would feel like to let go. There were thousands of feet between me and the valley of the winding Urubamba River. It was lush and green and oddly inviting. I stared down, feeling an exhilarating combination of anticipation and trepidation tugging at me.

“Say cheese, Tiger Lily.”

The voice shoved my dark thoughts aside. “Not another photo.” I looked at Jesse. “This is my fourth day in these clothes.”

“It’s only day two for that shirt. I’m pretty sure you changed yesterday.” Jesse tousled my hair. “You’re always so glamorous. It’s kinda fun to see you roughin’ it. Like Ava Gardner in *Mogambo*—you know, the scene where she tries to feed the baby elephant and gets mud all over her? That’s so cute.”

For a split second, I pictured the scene, and it almost made me smile. But the memory faded almost instantly, as if it were a relic of another life. I went back to studying the valley. “How high up are we?”

“Eight thousand feet. You breathin’ okay, Lil?”

“Not bad. It’s easier here than it was in Cusco.” I didn’t add that I’d felt like death in Cusco. For the past three months, I’d barely slept, unless I knocked myself out with sleeping pills. In Cusco, even the pills hadn’t worked. The combination of thin Andean air and shallow breathing left my lungs starving

for oxygen, and my body's panicked self-preservation mechanism kicked in every time I lost consciousness. A terrifying jolt of adrenaline would shock me awake, leaving me gasping and bolt upright in bed, as if I'd had a nightmare, though I rarely slept long enough, or deeply enough, for dreams anymore.

"That's 'cause Cusco is over eleven thousand feet above sea level," Jesse said. "We started at the top."

When we arrived in Peru, we'd headed straight to Cusco, the ancient Inca capital, and we'd started hiking the Inca Trail with a group the next day. It had sounded like an exciting plan when Jesse suggested it on the phone. In reality, I'd overestimated my abilities and my resilience. Now that we'd completed the four-day hike, all I could say for the Inca Trail was that it had worn me down to the point where I didn't care to see another moss-covered ruin again. I was so weary, it would only take the slightest gust of wind to knock me over and down and out for good. I wouldn't have cared.

"Hey! You payin' attention to any of this?" Jesse asked suddenly.

"Any of what?"

"That's what I thought! Here I am, tryin' to get you up to speed on Inca architecture, and you're starin' down there like a big magnet's pullin' you in."

"You should go back to the group. I'm such bad company right now." Not sleeping had left me dwelling permanently in twilight, and I couldn't shake myself out of it.

"I'm sorry, Lil. I'm just blabbin'. I know you're not yourself, for plenty of reasons." He didn't mention the obvious one, that my sister's funeral had taken place in January, three months and two days earlier. Instead, he cleared his throat. "I'm to blame for draggin' you here. Thought it would be

good for us to spend time together, and to travel. Hell, I thought you'd be writin' stories and I'd be takin' photos to go with 'em. But I rushed you into this trip."

"No you didn't. I wanted to come." I couldn't remember why I'd agreed to do it. Jesse had talked me into it, of that I was certain. My friend could be very persuasive. He'd gone on about how the trip to Peru would pay for itself with work assignments for both of us—me as a writer and Jesse as a photographer—and that was probably true. But the real reason I'd agreed to the trip was that I had nowhere else I wanted to be. After Claudia's funeral, I'd drifted around New York, my hometown, in a daze. Then I'd returned to Spain, where I'd been living for the past year. My Barcelona apartment seemed hopelessly empty—even though I'd already been living there alone—and I felt like an inept ghost stumbling through it and bumping into walls. It had been a relief to go along with Jesse's plan. But I was just as miserable in Peru as I was everywhere else. The awful part was that now I was dragging Jesse down into quicksand with me.

"That's my girl." He put his arm around me, and I rested my head on his shoulder. For a minute, we were both quiet. "You hear that?" Jesse asked.

Straining my ears, I could hear a man speaking English with a local accent. "Now, I will tell you of Emperor Pachacutec, who built Machu Picchu. Did you know conquistadors never discovered the site? Everything is *exactly* as the emperor left it."

"That's Diego, isn't it?" I said.

"Yeah. Let's just hope he doesn't figure out we went AWOL and skipped out on his group."

Diego had been our guide through our four-day hike along the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu. He was a sweet man, but he had an unfortunate tendency to make everyone stand in place

for an hour at a time while he described the history of a site and the mythology and folklore around it. I got more than enough of that from Jesse.

“He’ll be upset when he finds out we’re gone.”

“But by then, we’ll have had the fun of exploring Machu Picchu while it’s almost empty,” Jesse answered. “Those trainloads of tourists won’t start arrivin’ for an hour. We got the run of the most beautiful sight on earth. C’mon. Let’s get a good head start on everybody else. So long, suckers.”

He led me away from the ledge. My waterlogged hiking boots squished every time I put a foot down on the stones of the winding pathway. It had poured every day since we’d flown in to Cusco—no surprise, given that it was rainy season in the Andes. But now the sun had burned off the layers of mist and fog that had shrouded Machu Picchu as we’d hiked in through the Sun Gate. We didn’t speak for what felt like ages, and then Jesse said, “It’s gonna take Diego and everybody else a donkey’s age to catch up with us here.”

“Where . . .” I started to ask, but the question died on my lips. As we’d walked, I’d kept my eyes on the stone pathway, still slick with rainwater. Now that I lifted my eyes, I was breathless again. We were standing on the edge of the Inca city. On our left was a wall of perfectly fitted stone; below us, on my right, were endless layers of terraces, which resembled tiers of an epic cake. Ahead, there were more Inca walls, with triangular stone buildings perched atop them, row after tidy row. In the near distance, I could see another mountain, thin gray fog covering its peak like a veil.

“It’s beautiful,” I whispered.

“Told you it’d all be worth it, didn’t I?” Jesse surveyed the city with satisfaction. “We have it all to ourselves for a little while.”

He spoke too soon. A man's voice swept by us, faint but angry. "You lied to me."

"How dare you judge me!" The woman's voice was shrill.

"I was trying to help you."

"Leave me alone! I wish I'd never come back."

Jesse rolled his eyes. "Apparently there's no such thing as peace and quiet 'round here anymore."

"Paradise lost?" I tried to smile. "Was it ever really as good as you remember?"

"First time I came here, we were still in college. I'd never seen anyplace so beautiful. I love the mythology of it, too. How the Spanish looked for it but never found it. How Hiram Bingham was led here by farmers in 1911. Wish I could've seen it then." Jesse squinted, as if imagining the stones overgrown with vegetation. "You know we're standing in an earthquake zone, right? This has been here for five centuries. Nobody can figure how the Incas built the walls, how they made them so perfect." Jesse ran his hand over the stone wall. "You're touching what they made, not a reconstruction of it."

I touched the wall, surprised that it wasn't flat. The Incas hadn't shaved the stones to make them even, and looking at the differently sized and shaped pieces, I couldn't figure out what held them together.

"There's no mortar," Jesse added, as if reading my mind. "I'm not kiddin' about nobody today understanding how they put this together. It's like the biggest jigsaw puzzle on earth."

When I looked at the panorama of the city on the mountaintop, all I could think was how much I wished Claudia could have seen it. My sister had never cared much for travel, and she'd mocked me for flitting from place to place, but this would have impressed even her. My chest constricted when I thought of her, to the point where it sometimes became hard

to breathe. It was as if her memory could strangle my heart. Then I heard a short, sharp shriek and felt a jolt of adrenaline crackling through me with the force of electricity.

“Did you hear that?” I asked Jesse.

“Sure did. C’mon, it was from this direction, I think.”

We followed the stone path and heard another scream. Both of us rushed to the top of a steep staircase. At the bottom, completely still on the stone landing, was a woman’s crumpled body.