



CHAPTER ONE

A LITTLE TURBULENCE

With practiced slices, Teya cut into the soft skin of her thighs. She gasped. The blood welled up in bright, scarlet beads.

She imagined how horrified her father would be if he discovered what she'd been doing with his precious spearheads. The thought made her press the blade deeper.

It hurt. Her breath hissed through her teeth. But the immediate calm that flowed over her was worth it. For a moment her body softened, and she was able to breathe in the golden morning, eyes closed to feel its warmth.

'Teya! We're going to be late. Get down here now!' Her mother's voice made her jump with guilt, and she hurriedly grabbed the disgusting hanky she kept under her bed, and dabbed at the mess on her thighs.

'Teyacapan,' her mother yelled. 'I won't tell you again.'

'I'm coming, Bolshevik.' Teya scowled, checking to see that her bedroom door was locked.

The hanky was stiff and brown with her dried blood. She wiped the spearhead too, and looked at it. It was her favourite, thin and perfect – beautiful. Chipped from jet-black volcanic glass, it was razor-sharp, and so finely hewn towards its tip that it was almost transparent when she held it to the light, the black swirling into misty grey.

Gently, as though laying a baby bird to rest in its nest, she placed it among the other knives and spearheads in the dog-eared cardboard box. They glinted up at her. Some of them could have been two thousand years old, her father had told her. Some he'd found himself in Peru. Others his own father had given him and had been passed down through the family for generations.

'Thanks heaps Dad,' she said to the spearheads. 'But that's it. That's the last time. I won't do it again. You'll never hurt me again.' She closed the box and slid it back to its secret home under her bed.

She hauled herself off the bed, then reached for her hairbrush, as she always did, and started on the impossible task of brushing the knots from her hair.

The image in the mirror didn't please her. She looked like she'd been flying on the wings of a bird, her hair whipped into a wild thicket by imaginary winds. Why couldn't she look like the other Bondi girls? Why didn't she have blonde hair, a cheeky snub nose, something interesting to put in a bra? Okay, red hair would be fine on a pretty pale girl, but on a dark skinned half Peruvian one it just looked stupid.

Yuck. Too thin, too flat chested, just too... yuck. Her gymnastics teacher told her it was a real gift, that big boobs just got in the way on the balance bar, but what was the point of a perfect triple handstand when you looked like a stick insect in skinny-jeans and a boob tube? 'Baby-horse legs', they called her at school.

She scowled at herself, standing there in her undies, the morning sunshine setting fire to the tangled, unruly mess leaping down her shoulders. She'd been threatening to cut her hair off for years, and some days – especially lately – she'd been tempted to grab some scissors and hack it right off at the roots. And as for her body, its sharp planes seemed even more awkward than usual. All acute angles, no curves at all. Just like a Picasso painting she'd seen once on a school excursion. Freak.

She threw on some baggy jeans and an old T- shirt, then scraped back her hair, trying to capture it in a hair tie at the back of her head. Rogue tendrils immediately made a bid for freedom, so she jammed on a baseball cap and pulled it low over her eyes.

Why did she still care about her appearance? It had been less than a year since her world had imploded. Since the 'awful time.'

No. No. No ...

Not fair. Not fair. Not fair.

Quickly, she dragged the cardboard box back out from under her bed, took the smallest sliver of obsidian, wrapped it in a sock, then hid it in her undies bag inside the open backpack.

Just in case.

'Teya! You're going to miss the plane. Breakfast. Now.' Her mother's voice had gone up an octave.

'Brushing my teeth.' She went to the bathroom and scrubbed her teeth until she spat blood.

Finally she clattered down the stairs, her old trekking boots trailing their laces. She felt her injured skin scrape against the denim of her jeans every time she moved. Good.

‘Baby, do your laces up. You’ll trip.’ Her mother pulled her close for a moment, then held her away to examine her daughter’s face. Teya tried to squirm free. Her mum’s eyes were like probes.

‘Eat.’

‘Not hungry, Mum.’

‘You don’t know what they’re going to give you on the plane. Now have something. A banana at least.’

Teya did her *I don’t give a crap shrug*, but then peeled a banana and poured herself a coffee.

‘Did you brush that hair?’ Beth asked. ‘You look like a madwoman. You look like the cat’s uncle.’

‘Nup. That’s the look I was going for.’

Her mum’s hair was the same volcanic red, but somehow it seemed harmonious framing her porcelain skin and green eyes. She was curvy, too, and it all just seemed to fit together. Although Teya had inherited the green eyes and shocking red hair, somehow the arrangement was far from soothing. Set within the honey-brown canvas of her angular face, her eyes were too big, too green, the hair an angry explosion. People had never been shy about commenting on Teya’s looks, a fact that continued to infuriate her.

‘Okay, okay. Sorry. You all packed, sweetheart?’

‘Chill out, Mum. I’m packed. I’ve got my passport. Everything’s cool.’

‘All right love. Sorry to be a dag.’

Teya was too busy scowling at her banana to notice the rigid set to her mother’s shoulders as she turned away to wipe the bench, but when she heard the stifled sniff, she looked up.

‘Mum? What is it?’

‘It’s nothing, baby. I’ll miss you, that’s all.’

‘Then why do I have to go? I hate Peru.’

‘How do you know? You’ve never been.’

‘I just hate it. Stupid Alpacas and dumb ruins. I’ll probably die of altitude sickness. Or get my face eaten off by piranhas or something. Hate it.’ It was true. She did hate everything Peruvian now. She couldn’t bear to even look at her father’s album

covers, let alone listen to the music he'd played. But most of all, she hated the language. The very idea of speaking Quechua, the native language of Peru that he'd taught her, made her sick with rage. She wanted to spit the words right out of her body, and smash them to pieces under her feet.

'There are no piranhas in the mountains. Just in the jungle.'

'So, what, it's cool with you if I die of altitude sickness?'

'No one dies of it. Darling, think about it. You'll learn so much.'

'Oh yeah. I can write an awesome essay about it. "What I Did On My Holidays. Went to Peru and got my face eaten off by piranhas. The end."'

'Look, we've talked about this - the therapist, your teachers... I just think it's the best thing for you.'

'Sorry to be such a hassle for you. You'd love it if I just disappeared, wouldn't you? I told you I didn't want to go, but you don't care what I want.' She said it deliberately, and then sat back and waited for the words to drop. Her mother's lips tightened, and her eyes widened as they did when she tried not to cry.

Good.

Teya knew she was a bitch and hated herself, but so what? It was so unfair. All she wanted to do was hide in her room, forget about everything. But now she would be forced into the world, to face all those thousands of foreign eyes staring at her, questioning her, making her feel even more of a freak.

And then there was the Peruvian relatives, the ones she'd never met. How would she deal with them?

'Look, Teya. You *are* just a kid.' Beth busied herself crashing plates in a stack on the sink. 'You think you're not I know. You kids think you know everything but there's times I just have to make an executive decision about stuff. You need a change, to see new things.' Her voice was strung tight and sounded too forceful. But when the sink was empty she turned, her face almost pleading. 'You'll like your uncle Isandro. He's so excited to meet you. Your cousins too. You're so lucky to have this opportunity. Not many kids your age get to have an adventure like this. Machu Picchu! The Inca Trail! Imagine it.'

'Stop, like, grooming me.'

'And the eclipse. How many people get to see that from the top of a mountain?'

'I don't care about that.'

'When I was a kid I was lucky if Grandma and Pop took me to Noosa.'

‘At least you would have had a proper freakin’ toilet.’

Teya pictured the family home in Cusco. In her mind, it was like some National Geographic program she’d seen about third world countries. Their house would be a single-roomed slum with a dirt floor and no plumbing, no lights or TV or proper food. She would have to sleep on the floor surrounded by strangers who would probably hate her. How would she survive? She imagined herself dying of diphtheria, or leprosy or something gross. It was just so unfair. How could her mother do this to her?

‘You’ll love it. You’ll see. Going there changed my life. You can’t imagine how different the world can be until you see it. So colourful. And the music. When I first saw your dad play...’

They both froze. Olin was a subject that was forbidden, and had been since that terrible night ten months ago.

The ‘awful time.’

As they gathered her bags to leave, Teya took one last look around the cluttered Bondi home she’d known for fifteen years. Mismatched antique chairs, worn Persian rugs, bright slashes of colour from abstract paintings, a vase of dead rose buds, dried and shrivelled like tissue paper. A battered piano, flutes, drums and guitars filled the corners but were now voiceless, dead, gathering dust.

It wasn’t fancy, but it was home – familiar and easy.

In the car to the airport she plugged into her music so she didn’t have to speak, and let her mind drift. Bathed in morning sunshine, the familiar streets flashed past, her eyes moving back and forth hypnotically. As they drove up Bondi Road, cresting the corner, she turned her head to see the wide expanse of Bondi Beach, the famous jewel green water spangled with sunlight, the sky an answering blue. The colours seemed too bright, too joyful, a mockery of the grey landscapes within her.

‘Chin up, Kiddo,’ Beth said as they waited in line to check in at the airport. ‘Try not to hate your old mum too much.’

‘Oh, Mum. Shut up.’ She shoved her earphones in her pocket and got her documents together. ‘I don’t hate you.’

‘Two months will flash by, you’ll see. You’ll be home before you know it.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Please, please don’t drink the water. Anywhere.’

‘Affirmative.’

‘Not even to brush your teeth. And wash your hands.’

‘Acknowledged.’

‘Keep your passport on you. In your money belt.’

‘You said that already a thousand times. Stop being so random.’

‘I know, I know. But South America’s not like Australia. You have to be more careful. People get robbed all the time, and worse.’

The queue took forever, and Beth was getting more wound up the longer they waited. Teya shrank deeper into her coat, her responses becoming increasingly robotic. She hated the way her mother hassled her, and she hated the guilt she felt when she tried to push her mother away. She desperately wanted to be alone, but when she was, she felt horribly lonely. She just couldn’t win.

She stared down a few curious passengers. Most normal people would shrink under her lethal death-ray-glare. It was Teya’s way of clearing space, of creating a shield around herself.

But two boys standing in line ahead of them must have thought they were fully badass. They looked about eighteen or nineteen. She felt like punching them as one turned to his mate to say:

‘Jeez – the mum’s okay, but look at the daughter. That. Is. One. Weird. Chick.’

‘Wouldn’t touch her with yours, mate.’ Their laughter was raucous.

Teya shot tractor-beams into the airline check-in lady who seemed to be tagging bags in slow motion. Her fury built.

‘Can’t we do self check-in, Mum?’ she asked. She suddenly wanted to get away as quickly as possible.’

‘No way. Never trust those things,’ said her Mum ‘You’ll end up in Abu Dhabi or something.’

‘That’s so stupid.’

‘Look at her eyes,’ went on dickhead one to dickhead two. ‘Www dot googly eyes dot com.’

‘Nice one.’

‘Psychic.’

‘More like psycho.’

Teya couldn't believe they were actually high fiving each other. Her face felt stiff, the muscles frozen into a neutral mask, the expression of nothingness she'd been practicing so faithfully.

Finally they were through, and Teya was about to be released through the gates to customs. Beth held her tightly, her voice cracking as she spoke.

'I love you, Teya. Take care of yourself. And don't cross your arms like that. It makes you look defensive.'

'I *am* defensive.'

'Uncle Isandro's mobile number's in your phone, isn't it? Just in case?'

'Stop micro-managing me.'

'You'll love Argentina. Buenos Aires is like Paris!'

'Coolio.'

'But Peru! I'm so excited for you.'

'*You* go then.'

'Darling please...'

'Sorry, Mum.'

'Tey...' Beth paused for a moment, searching her daughter's angular face. 'I just want my old Teya back. I miss that happy girl.'

'Yeah, well...'

'The wheels fell off a bit, didn't they sweetie.'

Teya felt her eyes burn. Her mother hugged her tightly, squashing her arms into her sides. She didn't hug back, but pulled a crooked gangster grin, and said out of the corner of her mouth:

'Get offa me woman. I gotta splitsville.'

'I know, I know.'

'Don't worry.'

'Email me every couple of days. And call me when you get there.'

'I will.'

'I love you.'

'I *know*.'

'Darling...'

'What?'

'Darling he's gone now...'

'You don't know that. You don't know anything. No one knows.'

‘We have to let him go.’

‘SHUT UP.’

Teya tore herself free. Two sets of green eyes were locked together, but it was Teya’s that broke the connection. Without another word, she swung around and headed through the sliding doors.

Teya had never been so high. The mountain seemed to pitch and roll under her feet, tipping her towards the massive bowl of emptiness. The space pulled at her, drew her into itself, and she teetered. Clouds drifted thousands of feet below, and an icy wind rushed up, freezing her cheeks and filling her ears with its shout. Far beneath her, dark birds flew in lazy circles.

She hurled herself off.

But the frozen squall whipped her upwards, then bore her far away. She began to circle, riding the air in lazy loops and wheels. A strange calm engulfed her.

She fell then, fast. The clouds rushed towards her, and she was surrounded by the gigantic birds. They tumbled about her, black and sleek as seals, slicing the air with serrated wingtips. Their wild cries tore at her, tossing her about like a limp doll. The biggest turned his head towards her, catching her with his sharp eye. He dived beneath her, and caught her between his wings. He had chosen her.

They flew like that, her straddling his wide glossy back, higher and higher on rising columns of air until they nearly touched the Sun – became themselves a black speck against its blinding, massive face.

But before they reached it they slammed into a pocket of air. His huge body capsized, flipped and tumbled in the claws of the wind, and she held on, feathers and clouds and fragments of blue spiralling downwards for thousands and thousands of feet, to smash into the ruined city below.

Teya jerked awake.

‘Just a little turbulence, folks.’ The captain’s voice came over the intercom.

‘Buckle up. Nothing to worry about.’

Her heart was thumping, the dry rush of wings still in her ears. The screaming wind was a distant echo, dissolving into the white noise of the plane at cruising altitude. She hated planes. She hated being boxed in. She hated everything.

Fifteen and a half long, delirious hours later she found herself walking through the arrival gates at Buenos Aires Airport. So this was jet lag. It wasn't unpleasant – in fact, she liked the dead feeling inside.

It was early morning, and the light seemed to struggle through a thick layer of smog outside. She looked around her and felt a thrum of panic. Where was Uncle Isandro? How would she recognise him among the sea of foreign faces? Perhaps he had forgotten? Or gotten the day wrong?

She clutched her bags close, remembering her mother's words about thieves. People rushed around her – everyone seemed to have a purpose, a direction.

Except for her.

'Teyacapan! Teyacapan Mamani. Teya!'

Teya tried to smooth her hair, which was probably sticking out in all directions. She turned toward the voice and shock ricocheted through her.

No more than three metres from her, smiling broadly, stood her missing father.