

## **LAST SEEN IN LHASA**

### **CHAPTER 1**

#### **The Pass of Sharp Stones**

I DON'T know how I know Ani as I do. I know how I met her. I know how old she is and that at the age of twenty-two she ran away from home to join a nunnery. I know she is the fifth of nine children and grew up in a large black tent spun from yak hair. I know how at ease I feel when I am with her. Why we were thrown together is a question I have yet to find an answer to. Some would say fate, others dismiss it as chance.

My lasting memory of Ani is crossing a mountain pass in south-east Tibet. Usually one step ahead, Ani strode purposefully with a gnarled staff in her hand. The sleeves of her fuchsia-pink blouse billowed. Her straw hat sagged from the monsoonal downpours. She steered me steadily along the path, only slowing down when we wound upwards. The higher we climbed, the more rugged the landscape, the thinner the air. I became short of breath, my lungs straining with each step. Ani started to feel dizzy and to keep us on track we held hands tightly. At that moment nothing separated us from the spirit of existence.

The landscape resembled a living Stonehenge with lichen-clad boulders and giant rocks. In the distance was a glacier, its dirty mintyblue snout pointing down the mountainside. By a river, a sculpture of burnished amber rocks gleaming under the crush of glacial melt, there was a mule that had sunk to its knees and died. As we approached the summit of the pass, snow crunching underfoot, I picked buttercupyellow primulas and electric-blue poppies – an offering of gratitude for our safe passage. Side by side now, Ani and I fell into step. Her knees were troubling her – she suffered from arthritis. I could barely feel my legs, numb with cold.

Finally the top of 'the pass of sharp stones' came into view, marked with faded prayer flags. The wreckage of an army helicopter lay scattered near more skeletons of mules. The local porters were slumped near their bamboo baskets laden with luggage. There were cairns of stones, greying khatas – ceremonial scarves – to placate the temperamental mountain deities and I placed the bunch of flowers among them. My head was spinning from the altitude, which was 13,500 feet. Bowing her head, Ani tied a khata at the windswept altar as she said a short prayer. With the wind buffeting us and barely able to stand, after a brief pause to catch our breath, we tumbled back down the other side.

This image remains singed in my mind: the sheer physical exertion of the climb through a wilderness barely touched by the modern world, the camaraderie between us and knowing that without Ani at my side, I'm not sure I could have made it.

We were in Pemako, a region geographically unlike anywhere else on the barren Tibetan plateau, one of the most forbidding and little known places on the planet, with a history lost in the thickets of myth and folklore. Accessible only on foot, Pemako (pronounced Pem-ack-oh) lies nestled among the Himalayas between Tibet and north-east India. With a tiered eco-system that extends from snowfields to evergreen forest before plummeting to subtropical jungle, it is home to bears and snow leopards, long-tailed monkeys and Bengali tigers. Pygmy blue flycatchers swoop and dive, fire-tailed sunbirds hover above flamecoloured orchids.

In 1992 the Chinese authorities granted a Western group permission to visit, the first in over half a century. Seven years later the valleys were again closed and there are no signs they will be reopened. As far as I know, I am the only English woman to have set foot in Pemako, 'the Promised Land of Tibetan prophecy. . . hidden behind misty barriers where ordinary men do not go'. I had first gone to the mountains that border Pemako in search of a rare red lily. Little could I have predicted how that flower would interweave my destiny with a woman eleven years older than myself, who lived differently to anything I had ever known or believed still existed.

Ani spends her days on pilgrimage, walking from holy site to sacred mountain, her life solely devoted to a higher purpose. What defines me bears no relevance to Ani. We do not speak the same language nor do we share background, life experience or belief. In order to understand her, I realised I needed to adopt a new mode of perception. For this I tried to define what Ani is: by birth a nomad, by nature a wanderer, by nurture a pilgrim and by choice a nun.

I enjoy the company of others; Ani seeks out solitude. I'm intellectual, I think in words; Ani is mystical, she rests in the spaces between the words. I can't bear the cold. Ani lives in the coldest house imaginable and, if she must, will sleep out in the snow on plastic sheeting with a sheepskin for warmth. She has no money and eats the same indigestible meal – tsampa – three times a day.

And yet, improbably, over the years as I have travelled back and forth to Tibet our friendship has taken seed. As I have become more aware of what happens to a people when a country is occupied and freedom is denied, each of my seven journeys has been, in a sense, part of my own pilgrimage. Each stage has allowed me to discover a deeper truth. Friendship requires patience. It takes time to build trust, especially in a country where foreigners are mistrusted and political oppression is a daily part of life. For Ani to travel with me and invite me into her home took considerable risk. But for Ani to open her inner world to me – the vanishing world of a wandering hermit – took rare and singular courage. She is the last of a generation, a lone woman in pursuit of perfection, in search of enlightenment.

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