

## Chapter 1

### EVEREST BASE CAMP TIBET

The bus wheezed and spluttered as it struggled up the pass. Steam began to spew out of the engine bay. I heard the driver crunch down the gears, grumbling as the machine lost power.

Finally, just as it seemed the vehicle would suffer a mechanical heart attack, the driver coaxed a few more revs out of the old wreck and we lurched up the last switchback turn, arriving at a flat section of road adorned with brightly coloured prayer flags and Buddhist cairns.

The engine shuddered with a metallic clanking noise as the driver turned it off.

'Good photo place!' our guide exclaimed.

We climbed out of the cab. None of us uttered a sound, not wanting to spoil the moment with meaningless words of wonder. The only noise was the fluttering of the little silk pennants rippling in the light wind.

I let my eyes drink in the view. Twenty-five miles from our viewpoint stood the most stunning mountain vista I had ever seen.

*Everest.*

This was the vision of the mountain that I had heard so much about. The view of the North Face seen from the high passes of the Tibetan plateau.

'We've got a word in English,' I told my travelling companion, Klaus. 'We call something like this "gobsmacking".'

'*Gobsmacking?*' Klaus repeated with relish, his thick German accent giving bizarre emphasis to the word.

I wished my Nepali friend Kami could have been with me at that moment. It was him that had inspired me to make this journey. He had once climbed to within a stone's throw of the summit. Everest was a part of him; he would have loved this view. I felt Kami's presence. Almost like he was standing there beside me.

At that moment I reached into the side pocket of my fleece. The pocket that held the tiny metal shrine bell, Kami's most treasured possession. The brass seemed strangely warm to the touch, almost as if the proximity to Everest had fired up some unexpected power within it.

I shivered. I wasn't superstitious but I did sometimes wonder about this precious object which had been passed to my care.

A truck full of Chinese troops suddenly swept past at speed. The daydream was shattered.

A dozen ravens took flight, rising from nearby rocks, their wings beating black and hard against the thin air. The ground shuddered. Just the slightest tremor.

'What was that ... ?' Klaus laughed nervously.

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The camp at the foot of the North Col was a bustling hub of human activity: hundreds of red, yellow and green tents were clustered on the glacial terrain, yaks arriving continuously, carrying the special blue equipment barrels that seem universal to every expedition.

'There must be a thousand people here!' Klaus exclaimed.

There was an incredible energy to the place, the air filled with a distinctive mix of scents: kerosene, perfumed glacier cream, the pungent smell of animal dung.

'I smell bacon,' I told Klaus. The tantalising aroma of cooked breakfast was seeping from a nearby mess tent. 'Must be Brits around!'

Many of the teams had hoisted their national flags outside their camps. We took a walk; heard Russian voices laughing across the moraine. A team from Iran were newly arrived. Climbers from the Basque country of Spain were eating breakfast al fresco, sitting around a gas stove outside their mess tent.

Then, amongst the chaos, someone caught my eye. It was a girl, roughly my own age, leading three yaks into the camp.

At first I thought she was a Westerner, tricked by the fleece and trekking trousers she wore, but then, as she turned her head and we locked eyes for a moment, I saw her deeply tanned face and shoulder-length plaits of jet-black hair and realised it was a local Tibetan girl. I felt my breath catch.

She looked towards me, raised a camera and took a shot of me and Klaus. Then, with a cheeky smile, she turned back to her yaks.

'That's a pretty girl,' Klaus teased me. 'Love at first sight?'

I punched him lightly on the arm.

'Check out the mountain!' Klaus said suddenly.

Everest was illuminated by a burst of sunlight.

I took a series of photographs, pushing in ever closer with my telephoto lens to pick out details. I spotted the notches in the ridge that marked the famous 'first step', the notorious sections of almost vertical rock that cut into the climbing route. Further

up was the even more impressive 'second step', the final cliff that guarded the summit ridge.

What would it be like to be up there? I wondered. In the Death Zone. Treading the wild margins between life and death. I felt a tinge of regret; the journey I was currently making was just a trek, a trip to Base Camp and no further. The permits and equipment to actually climb were far beyond my resources. For the moment.

'Seventy million years in the making and still rising by a few centimetres every year.' Klaus said.

'Let's go for a walk,' I said. 'Get some photos from a different angle.'

We crunched across the ice. A slight ache started to spread across the side of my chest. The thin air was causing me to breathe deeper than normal, stretching my chest muscles.

Fifteen minutes later we reached the viewpoint I had in mind.

And that was when the earthquake hit.

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The earth gave a massive lurch and I was thrown to the ground, falling awkwardly. I hit the rocky floor of the glacier, the full weight of my body crashing on to my left wrist as I twisted instinctively to protect the camera.

Klaus stumbled but managed to stay upright.

'Was that what I think it was?' he said, his face pale.

*Earthquake?*

Stones clattered down the cliff face behind us. I sprang back to my feet, my heart thudding like crazy. Shouts rang out from the climbers down at the camp.

'Get away from the face!'

I looked up at the higher slopes which towered above us. At the ice fields, the vast quantity of wind-packed snow stacked a thousand metres above the camp.

'If that lot goes ...'

The second tremor was more violent, the sound of it primeval. A dragon's roar. A grinding symphony of crushed rock that came from deep in the guts of the planet. Someone screamed. The ground shimmered. Dust plumed upwards.

A shark's fin serac of blue ice collapsed on the glacier about ten metres from us. Thousands of kilos of shattered ice went skittering across the ground.

'Look!' Klaus grabbed my arm and pointed at Everest.

I spun around. The entire face was alive with movement. Rock fall, avalanche, dust trails and ice flowing down the gullies and couloirs at incredible speed. For a split second I thought about the climbers in the high camps. They wouldn't stand a chance.

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Klaus screamed: 'Run!'

A cloud of ice and tumbling rock was racing down the sheer cliff behind us. We sprinted away from the face.

I think we managed about three strides.

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The avalanche engulfed us. It felt like I'd been kicked in the back by a horse. I was blown off my feet, sent head over heels. Klaus smashed into me, our heads knocked together.

A fusillade of cracks and clunks came out of the dense cloud. Stone on stone. Stone on ice. Bullet-like impacts, half-seen objects flashing past in a blur of darkness. I kept my head down, skidding with my cheek pressed against gritty, frozen mud.

I snatched a look. Klaus had his head up. *Idiot!*

'Get down!'

A rock the size of a suitcase tumbled out of the void and smashed itself to smithereens on a boulder little more than an arm's length from our position. An even bigger missile went whirring overhead, disappearing into the white nightmare.

'We have to get away from the face! Come on!' Klaus yelled. He stood, moving quickly into the ice cloud.

I tried to stand. A frozen block cut through the avalanche, hitting me square in the ribs, smashing all the air out of my lungs.

'Ryan ... ?' Klaus called back.

A dense thud came through the silver haze. A sharp exhalation of air. The sound of a human body hitting the ground. The voice was cut off.

I spat out pieces of gravel. Stars exploded across my vision. I drew in a huge breath, shivering as crystals of ice got sucked into my lungs. Ice fragments continued to zip out of nowhere. Smaller stones and pebbles.

I scrambled up, managed to get on to all fours, still winded from the blow.

A figure appeared by my side, the face slowly coming into focus. It was the Tibetan girl – the one who had been leading the yaks. She looked bruised and covered in dust but otherwise in one piece.

‘Are you OK?’ she said.

‘Can’t ... breathe ...’

‘Come on!’ She yanked me upright and got my arm over her shoulders.

An aftershock undulated through the ground. The earthquake wasn’t done yet. A deep boom announced a further avalanche, somewhere far away on the other side of the valley.

‘Where’s my friend?’ I gasped.

I looked for Klaus, my guts twisting with dread.

Footsteps. A Sherpa came stumbling out of the gloom. Blood was dripping from a deep cut on his forehead.

‘This way! Quickly!’ he shouted. He pointed urgently into the ice cloud then vanished as swiftly as he had appeared, tripping unsteadily away.

‘Can you walk now?’ the girl asked.

Air flowed into my lungs. I gasped with relief. My ribcage flared with pain.

‘I guess.’

Seconds ticked by. The avalanche cloud began to clear.

Gradually the destruction became visible. The scene reminded me of battlefield photographs from the First World War.

‘Klaus?’ I called.

There was no reply.

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The camp had been trashed. Hundreds of tents wiped away. Everything had been torn to the ground or spirited skywards in the blast.

‘The gods have spoken ...’ the girl said quietly.

Crumpled figures were lying prone, many with gruesome injuries. We saw a climber with a broken neck, his head almost severed from his body. Expedition medics were running to help their teammates, or rummaging amongst the wreckage of their tents for first aid kits. Distressed voices rang out across the glacier, calling for lost friends.

'Klaus!' I yelled again. No answer came.

I heard the sound of a camera shutter. A Western photographer was standing nearby, taking shots of the scene. I realised with a sick feeling that he was filming the bodies.

'Klaus!'

We walked forward for ten or fifteen paces, finding odd bits of kit scattered around. Much of it was buried beneath the ice blocks that had cascaded down the cliff. We smelled gas, found one of the propane cylinders spewing its contents into the air. I turned off the valve. The girl stepped over to a deep crevasse.

'Look!'

I went to join her, staring into the depths at an extraordinary confusion of smashed-up camp equipment. In the midst of it all a boot and section of lower leg could be seen sticking out. I felt acid rising in my throat.

Klaus's boot.

'It's my friend,' I said.

The boot twitched.

'Quickly!' the girl exclaimed.

She jumped down into the shallow end of the crevasse without a moment's hesitation. I gritted my teeth and slid down next to her.

'We need something to dig with,' she said. We found a squashed saucepan and a baking tray amongst the debris.

The boot moved again. Klaus was buried head down. Entombed. Held fast in the grip of the ice.

The Tibetan girl was quick and strong, scraping out quantities of the rock-hard ice with each swing of her arms. I did the same with the metal tray, slicing down into the debris and throwing it into the far end of the crevasse.

I was soon out of breath.

'He felt us!' she said.

Klaus's legs kicked. Half remembered facts from a documentary flashed into my mind: how long avalanche victims have got before they suffocate. Fifteen minutes? That was the figure that came to mind. But I wasn't sure.

His waist was now exposed.

Dig. Dig. The girl was incredible, working twice as fast as me.

'Pull now!' she said.

I paused to draw oxygen into my lungs. I was dizzy, feeling faint. My chest ached with the effort of sucking in that super-thin air. The Tibetan girl took one leg. I took the other.

'Go!' she said.

We pulled like crazy.

Nothing happened. He was stuck fast.

'Harder!' the girl hissed.

We tugged with all our might. Klaus's upper body slipped suddenly free from the ice. He drew in a massive breath, flopping on to his side like a landed fish. His lips were bright blue. His face was creased with pain and shock.

'What took you so long?' he gasped.

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Klaus was evacuated by military helicopter one hour later. The bodies of two dead climbers were loaded in beside him. My German friend was one of the lucky ones.

'He's inhaled a lot of ice,' an expedition doctor told me as the helicopter flew off down the valley. 'His lungs could take a couple of weeks to recover.'

'He's tough,' the girl told me. 'I get the feeling he'll be fine.'

I nodded my agreement.

'You saved his life,' I told her. 'What's your name?'

'Tashi.'

'Ryan.'

We stood there awkwardly. I saw her turn and look up towards the mountain.

'What are you going to do now?' I asked.

A shadow fell across her face.

'I have to find out about my brother.'

'Your *brother*?' I looked around the devastated camp. 'Was he here when the earthquake hit?'

She bit her lip, continued staring up at the mountain. Then she spoke slowly.

'No. He was up there. At Camp 6. Helping an expedition.'

I thought back to the rock and ice avalanches that had swept the upper slopes of Everest. It was hard to imagine that anyone could have survived.

'Maybe we can find some information,' I suggested. 'Which team was he with?'

'They were from Switzerland.'

We stumbled around the glacier for a while, asking for the whereabouts of the team. Finally we found a tent with a Swiss flag fluttering above it, one of the very few that hadn't been destroyed. There was no one inside so we waited at the table for a while. Half an hour later a Sherpa man came in, limping heavily with a bloodied bandage round his leg.

'I haven't got anything to tell you,' he told us sadly. 'All I know is your brother was up there with one other climber.'

The Sherpa directed us to a large green tent stationed in the centre of the glacier. The buzz of urgent conversation came from inside.

'The Base Camp commander is in there,' he said. 'Maybe he can tell you more.'

We walked across the ice and pushed our way into the mess tent. The space was crammed with climbers all trying to talk at once. A radio set was squawking at high volume. In the middle of the mayhem a bad-tempered-looking Chinese military officer was fielding questions from the assembled expeditioners.

'You will get news when we have it!' he repeated over and over again. 'Now please leave the tent!'

The climbers showed no signs of leaving, but redoubled their efforts to get the man's attention.

I followed Tashi as she pushed her way through the crowd with grim determination. To my surprise the Base Camp commander seemed to recognise her, his face set instantly into a hostile stare.

'What do you want?' he asked.

'My brother Karma is at Camp 6,' she said. 'Do you have any information about him?'

'Your brother can't be on the mountain,' the commander said coldly. 'He hasn't got a permit.'

'He is there,' Tashi replied emphatically. 'Permit or not.'

The commander shook his head.

'Everyone at Camp 6 is dead,' he said firmly. 'You should forget about your brother.'

He stared at her with a strangely unsettling look and I saw Tashi wince.



'Now let me get on with my job!' he snapped.

We left the tent and stood in the freezing air for a few moments.

'He's under pressure,' I said finally. 'He probably didn't mean to be rude ...'

Tashi didn't say anything but it was clear from her frown she didn't agree with what I'd said. I felt a bit stupid; why was I trying to make excuses for that guy? He obviously hated Tashi for some reason.

'I don't believe him,' she said stubbornly. 'I'm sure Karma is still alive.'

The ground shivered with an aftershock. Pebbles tumbled down a nearby slope.

I suddenly thought back to the first time I had seen her.

'Where are your animals?' I asked.

Tashi's face clouded. She pointed to the other side of the camp.

'This way,' she said uncertainly. 'They were tethered by those rocks.'

We walked for a few minutes, through further scenes of devastation. Climbers were working to rebuild their tents. Helicopters were still flying in to the makeshift landing pad to pick up the wounded.

Suddenly Tashi stopped, a new expression of horror passing across her face. We were looking at a messed-up patch of ground. Avalanche debris had reached even this remote spot. There were boulders and piles of ice everywhere.

'They were here,' Tashi said quietly. 'I thought they would have been safe ...'

We stepped towards the small river that was cut in the glacier surface.

'Oh no!' Tashi ran forward. As I stepped beside her I saw three dark shapes entwined in a macabre embrace at the far end of the stream where it plunged into a hole in the glacier surface. Three yaks. Drowned. Swept into the river by the avalanche.

Tashi put a hand to her mouth. She stifled a sob.

I stood there, unsure what I could possibly do to help. I felt terrible for her. Her brother missing on Everest. All three of her yaks killed.

At that moment a bitter wind sprang up. The air felt bruised and heavy, like a storm was on the way. We retrieved the bag containing Tashi's belongings from the river. Everything was soaked. Even her sleeping bag and tent were sopping wet.

'What are you going to do?' I asked her.

'I don't know,' she said. Her worried eyes flashed with determination. 'But I won't leave this place while my brother is in danger.'

I felt an overwhelming sense of sorrow for her. A need to help.

'We can make a shelter,' I said. 'But we'd better move fast.'

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We began to scour the area, looking for canvas and tent poles. Within fifteen minutes we had collected a couple of flysheets and a heavy panel of Dacron from the piles of debris.

'A stove!' Tashi found a small cooker which looked like it might work.

Using lightweight para cord, we lashed the various bits of flysheet and canvas over four tent poles, creating a ramshackle shelter. There was no groundsheet, but a couple of strategically placed foam mats would protect us from the frozen glacier surface. Tashi fired up the little stove and put a pan of ice on to melt. We held our hands towards the flame, savouring the welcome wave of warmth coming off it.

'When was the last time you ate?' I asked her.

She shrugged.

'I had some rice last night.'

I found a Mars bar in my pack, split it in two and shared it with her. The taste was wonderfully sweet, a comforting burst of sugar.

'You're shivering,' she said.

Luckily I still had my sleeping bag and we soon found Klaus's bag inside his abandoned pack. We zipped them together to form one giant sleeping sack for the two of us, glad of the shared body warmth against the cold.

'What are your plans now your friend has gone?' Tashi asked. 'Will you still try to climb?'

'Climb Everest?' I had to smile at the idea. 'In my dreams! I'm just here on a trek. Travelling and taking photographs.'

I brought Tashi up to speed on the gap-year journey I was making, telling her also about the magical time I had recently had in Nepal, working for a medical charity.

'I should have been home by now,' I continued. 'Working on my mum and dad's farm before going to university. But I extended my trip, had to get a close-up look at Everest.'

'Obsession,' Tashi said flatly. 'Like my brother.'

'Definitely,' I agreed. 'Plus there is something else.'

I pulled the shrine bell from my fleece pocket and handed it to Tashi.

'My Nepali friend Kami took this with him when he climbed Everest,' I told her. 'He wanted to put it on the summit but never quite made it.'

Tashi turned the pretty little bell in her hands.

'These items are sacred,' she said. 'Powerful. The prayers of generations locked inside them.'

'My friend wants me to get it to Everest summit one day,' I told her, feeling slightly foolish. 'Finish the quest.'

'If the gods allow, anything is possible,' Tashi replied.

She handed the shrine bell back.

I thought about Tashi's brother, caught up there on the highest slopes of Everest. The chances of him still being alive seemed increasingly small.

'How old is Karma?' I asked her.

'Fifteen.'

I stared at her in surprise. I had imagined he would be much older.

'Isn't he a bit young to be climbing Everest?'

'Yes,' Tashi agreed. I could see she was close to tears.

She pulled a battered postcard from her pocket. I saw that it was a portrait of the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people. I knew that he had been exiled from Tibet for most of his life, hounded out of the country after the Chinese invaded.

Tashi mumbled a prayer as she viewed the picture.

'So how come your brother's up there?'

'It's a long story,' she said.

I noticed a dark stain across the photograph. I took it from her and looked at it closely.

'That looks like blood,' I said. 'What happened?'

Tashi sighed, drew out a long, deep breath.

Then she began to talk.

## Chapter 2

It was late spring on the plateau of Tibet. Streams were alive with meltwater. Butterflies were making their first tentative forays into the air, miraculously alive after being cocooned through the long Himalayan winter, the deepest and coldest on earth.

An eagle circled in an electric blue sky. A sky so dark it looked like a splash of deep space had accidentally been mixed in.

Tashi and her family had just arrived at the windswept grassy plain where the summer festival would be held. Snow-capped mountains glimmered in the distance. Everest was among them, mysterious behind a translucent veil of wispy cloud. Tashi felt a tingle of excitement run up her spine. Hundreds of nomadic families were arriving. The games were set to begin.

'This will be your year,' her father told her earnestly as they looked out across the lively scene. 'The white scarf will be yours.'

Tashi let her imagination soar, wondering if she could win the horse race that she had entered for the following day. It would take all her skill in the saddle, and plenty of courage as well. She had seen the risks such races involved, the broken legs and arms that came with a fall beneath thundering hooves. Occasionally there were fatalities but with luck she would snatch the white scarf from the ground; be the first girl ever to win the trophy.

Tashi and her father walked through the festival site, enjoying the bustle as the traders set up their stalls. Tantalising aromas filled the air; spicy *momo* dumplings frying in bubbling oil, sweet rice puddings known as *dresil*, filled with dried cherries, pecans and pine nuts.

A green Chinese army truck pulled up nearby.

'Lots of soldiers this year,' her father commented grimly.

A line of stern-faced young troops marched past. Tashi heard the crackle of walkie-talkies, the language alien to her. Tibet had been an autonomous region of China for two generations now but relations were strained and the people of this remote plateau still yearned for independence.

'Come to enjoy the show?' Tashi asked with a wry smile.

'Maybe.'

Families from all over the plateau were already pitching their tents. A thousand Tibetan nomads would arrive in the next twenty-four hours, each dressed in their

finest clothes. Then the festivities would start: archery competitions to decide the finest shot; wrestling for trophies; and the horse races in which Tashi excelled.

It was a celebration of life in Tibet. A celebration of what it meant to be a nomad on the highest plateau on earth.

'Don't you think the atmosphere is a bit tense?' her father said.

Tashi looked about: it was true that there were large groups of nomad youths hanging around looking restless, eyes darting every so often towards the troops. In the distance Tashi saw a convoy of army trucks moving along a dusty highway. They slowed, turning towards the festival field.

'Where's Karma?' she asked, suddenly feeling her heartbeat quicken.

Tashi realised she hadn't seen her younger brother all day.

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Tashi split from her father and found some friends.

'Have you seen Karma?'

They shook their heads.

A truck pulled up right next to them, a contingent of soldiers climbing out, wide-eyed young men, looking as out of place as if they had been dumped on the far side of the moon.

'This means trouble,' one of Tashi's friends muttered.

Tashi felt she was probably right.

The arrival of military personnel at the festival was no surprise to the young Tibetans. The previous two years had seen a huge increase in the amount of Chinese troops in almost every part of Tibet. Every town, every village, every monastery had soldiers attached, watching the local population with obsessive zeal, intent on sniffing out rebellion or dissent even if it was entirely imaginary.

The troops were young and ambitious, keen to prove themselves to their superiors. Snooping on the local populace was encouraged, spying almost endemic. Promotion could follow the arrest or detention of a local Tibetan. Tashi and her friends mostly kept their distance.

Suddenly Tashi saw her brother. He was wrestling two other lads on a patch of wasteland. One of them was a good head taller than Karma but Tashi's younger brother was fast and strong for his age.

'Karma!' she shouted. Her brother made a lightning move, picked up the bigger boy as if he was a sack of potatoes.

'Hey!' she called, louder. Tashi couldn't help smiling as the fight became critical.

Karma body-slammed his opponent into the dirt, a thick plume of dust rising up in a cloud. His opponent groaned, conceding defeat with a wave of his hand. Karma walked up to his sister, brushing dust off his clothes as he came.

'Want to try your luck?' he asked her. 'Best of three falls?'

'No thanks,' Tashi replied with a big grin. 'I wouldn't want to embarrass you in front of your friends.'

At that moment three of the soldiers marched past. Karma winked at his buddies and started to follow them.

'Karma!' Tashi hissed. She snatched at his arm but he shrugged her off with a laugh.

He fell in at the back of the stern-faced young conscripts, goose-stepping comically behind them to the delight of his buddies.

'You!'

The voice bellowed from a nearby jeep. An officer stepped out, dressed in a crisp uniform, three golden stars glinting in the sun.

Karma froze in his tracks, turning abruptly.

'Captain Chen,' one of Tashi's friends muttered. 'I know him, he's always looking for trouble.'

Tashi groaned beneath her breath. Typical Karma, she thought, always in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Karma stood there, staring at his feet as the military man strode up.

'You think it's a good idea to disrespect my soldiers?' he barked.

'It was just a joke, sir,' Karma replied.

'A joke? Those are representatives of the People's Army, here for the protection of us all, guarding the border zone day and night. There are enemies out there. Counter revolutionaries. You think that's a *joke*?'

'No sir.'

'Let me see what you have in your pockets,' Chen ordered.

Karma's eyes flitted to Tashi, his cockiness completely gone.

'Come on boy, quickly!'

Karma reached into his trouser pockets, bringing out some coins and a twist of twine.

'Now that one ...'

Karma brought out a small silver locket.

'Not carrying drugs I hope?' He opened the tiny silver box.

'No sir. Just some lucky beads.'

The army man tossed the small jade beads in his hand. Then he placed them none too carefully back into the silver box and snapped it shut.

'How about your jacket?' the officer said. 'What have you got in there?'

Karma did not move.

The officer reached out and searched Karma's top pockets, grunting as he found a small plastic wallet. Tashi held her breath. The man opened the wallet and found a photograph inside.

Karma went white in the face. Chen plucked the photograph from the wallet and held it right in front of Karma's nose.

'Who is this?' he said quietly.

Tashi felt her heart beating hard against her ribs.

'Well?'

'It's the Dalai Lama, sir ...'

'You know it is illegal to own a photograph of this socalled holy man?'

Karma nodded miserably.

'So? What are you doing with it?'

'I was given it, sir. I forgot it was there.'

'You will be punished for this,' Chen said. 'Where do you stay?'

'With my f ... f ... family,' Karma stammered. He looked across to Tashi and the officer spun round to follow his eyeline.

'Who are you?'

'I'm his sister.'

'Come here!' the officer ordered. Tashi walked over.

'Do you also break the law with images of this criminal?'

Tashi shook her head. 'No, sir.'

Chen thought for a few moments. His eyes bored into Karma with terrifying intensity.

'Maybe I should investigate further,' he said.

The soldier ordered the brother and sister to take him to the family tent.

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Karma led the way across the festival site to the place where the family were camped. The officer picked up two young soldiers on the way. Tashi wanted to yell a warning to her parents but she knew it would only make things worse.

A few of the other nomads were watching from nearby. Their mouths fell open when they saw Chen and his guards marching towards them.

In years gone by the military would never have bothered them at the festival. Just left them in peace. Clearly those days were over.

'This is our place,' Karma told him nervously.

The officer pulled aside the felt covering that served as a door and stepped in without announcing himself. Tashi and Karma followed, seeing their parents turn in astonishment as they saw the soldiers standing there. It was extremely discourteous for any visitor to enter without uttering a friendly greeting from outside.

'Karma? What's happened?' Tashi's father scrambled up from the blankets where he had been resting.

Chen held up the portrait of the Dalai Lama.

'Your son had this in his pocket,' he told them. 'Do you have anything to say?'

Karma hung his head. The only sound in the tent was the bubbling of the rice pot. Tashi felt her spine chilling.

'Perhaps the whole family needs to be investigated,' Chen proposed. 'Maybe you are all collaborators of this criminal?'

Tashi's father stepped forward, raising his hands in a conciliatory gesture.

'I'm sure this is all an unfortunate misunderstanding,' he said. 'The boy must have been given the portrait and forgotten to destroy it.'

'On the contrary,' the officer countered. 'The portrait was obviously a treasured possession. I fear your son has been brainwashed by counter revolutionaries.'



Tashi and her mother exchanged a horrified look. The soldier was trying to make it seem like Karma was some sort of terrorist. Just for carrying a picture of the Dalai Lama. It was so unjust it made Tashi want to weep.

The man looked around the tent then crossed to the sleeping area. He opened up some storage trunks and poked around amongst the clothes they contained.

'Perhaps you are members of a cell,' he snapped. 'Maybe in contact with the criminal himself in his Indian headquarters?'

Then he found the family strongbox.

'Open it,' he ordered.

'Please ... no,' Tashi protested. 'Those things are private ...'

Chen nodded at one of the guards. Tashi was pushed roughly to one side.

'Break the lock,' Chen commanded.

The soldier smashed the small padlock with the butt of his gun. It yielded on the third blow, and he flipped open the lid of the trunk. Chen began to rummage through the contents of the trunk, throwing family photographs and small religious figurines on to the blankets.

'You have no right ...' Tashi's mother said.

A small porcelain Buddha broke in two as it tumbled to the floor. The military man poked among the possessions for a while then seemed to bore of it. He walked up to Karma, gripping the young boy's chin hard in his right hand.

'I never forget a face,' he said.

Then he walked out of the tent.

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The long winter months crawled by. Hard for the yaks. Harder still for the family. The incident at the festival was never spoken about but it haunted them all the same; the family had left that very same night, Tashi abandoning her hopes to compete in the races.

Now it was time to pack up the family possessions. Winter was over and the trek to the summer grazing grounds was about to begin.

'Go and find Karma will you?' Tashi's mother asked.

Her younger brother had made himself scarce as usual when hard work was to be done.

Tashi found him by the lake, messing about on a battered old motorbike belonging to some friends.

'Come on!' she goaded him. 'Mother will go nuts if you don't come and help.'

A mixture of threats and persuasion dragged Karma back to the family tent and the process of loading up the yaks began.

Cooking utensils and fodder, blankets and fence posts, coils of rope, blocks of salt, the hundreds of simple items that make up the world of a nomadic family. A family that considers the plateau their spiritual home. A family that lives beneath the stars and adapts with the ever-changing seasons so that it is perfectly in tune with the land.

'One day I'm going to be rich,' Karma said. 'Buy a motorbike of my own and go round the world.'

Karma's crazy comments made Tashi laugh.

'You can't even afford a *bicycle*,' she teased. 'Get real.'

They dismantled the family tent, unpicking the threads that held the felt panels together. Tashi tied the bundles tight with cord, helped by her brother.

'Look what I bought,' Karma said. 'You see how they can't stop me?'

He showed Tashi a new photograph of the Dalai Lama that he kept in his top pocket. Tashi said nothing. Silently she applauded his bravado.

The yaks took their loads with bad-tempered grunts. The winter had been long and hard for them and they were out of sorts with the world. Dried hay had kept them alive but Tashi knew they craved the lush grass of the summer grazing lands. With every year of her life she had seen the animals' mood improve dramatically once they got to the valley.

'Ya!' Tashi's mother gave the nearest yak a warning stroke of her stick.

The twenty yaks ambled up the trail, gradually forming a long wavering line. Tashi stepped alongside them, feeling a glow of pleasure as she looked forward to the trek.

'Feels good to be on the move, doesn't it?' her father said.

Tashi nodded.

The trek would take one week, passing through the mountains on narrow shepherds' trails. Tashi found it refreshing to walk for hours each day, the chores of winter seeming like a distant dream as they passed through high mountain glades, carpeted with a profusion of spring flowers. Occasionally they found isolated tents, a lonely man or two tending a huge flock of sheep. Invariably they would be invited in for butter tea, swapping news from the plateau as bread and cheese was shared.

'Have you heard the rumours?' one shepherd asked them gravely. 'Soldiers are closing off the land.'

'There are stories,' Tashi's father replied cautiously. 'But we haven't seen any troops for a while.'

'Better to keep it that way,' the man said.

They continued, and, with each passing day, Tashi found herself lighter of spirit.

As they climbed up the final sloping path, Tashi picked up her pace. The long trek was almost over and the view from the top of the ridge was something that she relished. For years she had always been the first one of the family to reach that place.

She remembered it as a gorgeous view; a wide and fertile valley locked between two snow-capped mountain slopes. From that lofty vantage point, the entire grazing area was laid out, thick pastures of lush grass stretching for kilometres. Several streams tumbled off the higher peaks. It was an idyllic place to pass the summer. An opportunity for the yaks to build up fat. A chance for the family to enjoy their time together.

Tashi climbed, her heart filled with expectation. As she got closer to the ridge, Tashi heard the rumble of engines. Closer still she could see clouds of red dust filling the air. She slowed, frowning as she tried to work out what was going on.

She reached the top. Then stopped dead.

A road was being constructed. Just over the ridgeline. Bulldozers and earth movers were scraping into the bedrock of the valley wall. A line of heavy trucks was queuing to drop tarmac on to the newly graded surface. Fifty or sixty Tibetan workers were raking the hot tarmac into place. A dozen Chinese supervisors watched them impassively, clipboards clutched in their hands. The noise was horrendous. Rock was splitting and cracking. Pneumatic drills rattled a metallic serenade into the air. The road stretched away into the far distance. As far as the eye could see.

Tashi felt her stomach tighten as her brother Karma came up next to her.

'What's going on?' he said. 'Have we come to the wrong place?'

'No. It's the right place,' Tashi said sadly.

Karma put his hands to his ears.

'What are they doing?' he shouted.

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Their father joined them, all the colour draining from his face as he saw the mess the road makers had created.

At that moment Tashi spotted a military man. He was talking excitedly into a radio set and gesturing towards them.

'I think he's talking about us,' Tashi said nervously.

The moment the soldier ended his radio call the family heard a roar of different engines. A couple of military trucks came speeding round the bend in the road.

'Now we've got trouble,' Tashi's father muttered.

The army vehicles came to a halt on the other side of the road, the soldiers inside them jumping out with their guns at the ready. Her father put a reassuring hand on Tashi's shoulder.

'I'm sure they are just lost,' he told her.

Tashi felt dozens of staring eyes locked on to her. She wasn't sure she liked the expression on the faces of the young soldiers.

'They're looking at us like we've done something wrong,' she said.

'Just ignore them,' her father replied, 'I'll go and talk with the commander.'

'I'll come with you,' Tashi offered.

'No,' he told her hastily. 'You stay with Karma and Mother. Better I deal with them alone.'

Tashi and Karma turned around and started off back down the track. As they went their father called after them:

'Don't let your mother come up here. I don't want her to see this.'

They intercepted their mother halfway up the hill.

'The Chinese are in our valley?' she raged. 'Let me go up there and see about that!'

She made to race up the slope but Tashi and her brother held her back. Somehow they managed to stop her.

They found a small glade where the yaks could rest, hobbling the creatures to wait for their father to return. They rigged up the tent. Their mother brewed a kettle for tea but they found they had little appetite to drink or eat.

'Until now we have been lucky,' Tashi heard her mother say. 'There had to be a day when the Chinese would stand in our way.'

One hour passed. Then another. Tashi found her imagination running wild. Where was her father?

'What's happening up there?' Tashi's mother wailed. 'How long does it take to tell them to leave?'

'Perhaps he had to go to see a supervisor,' Tashi reassured her. 'We must stay calm.'

Finally they heard the noise of the tent fabric being pulled back. Tashi's father's face was grey. A nervous tic was pulling at the muscles of his cheek, something Tashi had never seen before.

'The soldier says the valley is closed,' he said grimly. 'The land is to become a national park, no people are allowed.'

There was a long silence as the family digested this unappetising revelation.

'You mean, we can't go into the valley today?' Tashi asked. Her young mind had failed to understand the enormity of the news.

Her father sighed.

'It means we can't go in forever,' he said. 'It's over.'

Tashi's mother stepped forward. She clutched her husband's hand.

'There must be some mistake,' she said. 'Our families have always used this land.'

'I told them that,' Tashi's father said. 'They say it makes no difference.'

'What are they going to do with this "national park"?' Tashi's mother asked. 'What's the point of it?'

Her father took a long sip of tea.

'They said the land is destroyed by animals grazing,' he said. 'They want to preserve it.'

'Preserve it?' Karma spat. 'It's not even their land in the first place.'

'They asked me for paperwork. Documents to prove that we had a right to graze the land. Of course I had nothing.'

'You had nothing because such papers don't exist!' Tashi's mother stabbed at her thigh with her finger as she spoke each word. 'We have the right to graze this land in summer because of the hundreds of years our families have been here! It has always been this way.'

'They don't care about that,' Karma said. 'They want to mess us up, that's all.'

'They can't stop us taking our animals in there!' Tashi said angrily. 'We will fight them if they try!'

Karma leapt up: 'Yes! That's the answer!'

'Fight them?' Tashi's father laughed bitterly.

He pulled back the tent wall so they could see up the slope.

'You see that?' he said. 'That's what you'll be battling against.'

Tashi looked out, seeing that the military vehicles were now lined up on the ridgeline, overlooking their campsite. Each one was packed full of armed troops, staring down on them with hostile expressions.

'Oh,' she whispered. 'I see.'

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'Where will we go?' Karma asked angrily. 'How can we feed the yaks when we can't give them good grazing?'

'There are other places,' his father replied. 'Maybe we will get lucky.'

'They need high ground,' Tashi reminded him. 'The yaks will get sick if we have to go beneath three thousand metres. We should insist on staying.'

'We cannot insist on anything. There's nothing we can do.'

Tashi stared at her father. She felt a hot flush of anger in her cheeks. Why was he giving in so easily?

'You want to let them win?'

'It's not a question of winning or losing,' he replied. 'You cannot "win" against the authorities. Not by force, at least. We have to take the example of the Dalai Lama, make prayer our focus.'

The family stayed in that spot for the night, watched over non-stop by a contingent of troops. At daybreak they packed up the tent and trekked for a few hours with their yaks to a small valley much further down which might offer a few weeks of grazing.

To their surprise, even though the place was too low for the yaks to be truly healthy, there were five or six other families already there, each with their herds of livestock.

'This land will be exhausted in no time at all,' Tashi's father said as they looked at the scene.

The other families welcomed them with genuine warmth, but their stories were bleak. All of them had been turned off their ancestral grazing lands, displaced by Chinese officials for a variety of reasons, each more distressing than the last.

'They've built a dam across the end of our summer lands,' one nomad raged bitterly. 'By this time next year the whole area will be drowned beneath a lake.'

'There's a mine being constructed on ours,' another herder complained. 'A hundred trucks every hour running down a new road. So much dust the grass has turned white.'

Tashi's father's prediction proved correct. The small valley could not sustain so many horses, yaks, sheep and goats, the grass cropped right down as the animals ate their fill. By midsummer the small patch of grazing was dried out and worthless, not a lush blade of grass in sight.

The yaks began to sicken as parasites attacked. They were so finely adapted to the thin air above three thousand metres that this lower place made them ill. The families remained, hoping that summer rains might replenish the grass.

One day a small convoy of vehicles pulled up next to the family camp.

'Visitors,' Tashi's father said ominously.

Tashi felt her heart lurch in her chest. One of the vehicles was full of soldiers.

The family watched as workmen unloaded sections of steel fence from the back of a truck. They got to work, building a small temporary compound in less than an hour.

Later a Toyota jeep arrived, dropping off three men in white laboratory coats.

'What's going on?' Karma asked.

'I have no idea,' their father replied. 'But it doesn't look good.'

Boxes were taken from the Toyota and a table was erected. Medical instruments and glass containers were laid out on the surface. One of the men in white laboratory coats approached Tashi's father. Three soldiers walked behind him.

'We need to test your animals for disease,' he said.

No attempt at a greeting. No friendly hello. Just a raw statement.

'Disease?' Tashi's father said. 'What are you talking about? There's nothing wrong with them.'

'We will be the judge of that,' the man said. 'Bring them to us.'

Karma had been holding his tongue. Now he flared up.

'What if we don't want to?'

'The soldiers are here,' the man said. 'They can deal with you if necessary.' The military men scowled at Karma. They looked like there was nothing they'd like more than to give him a good beating.

'It's just some basic medical tests,' the man continued soothingly. 'Nothing to be worried about so long as your herd is healthy.'

The yaks were taken into the metal compound one by one. The family could see that a number of procedures were carried out on each animal but when they tried to get closer the soldiers warned them away.

Finally the animals were released and the temporary compound was dismantled and loaded back on to the truck.

'Aren't you going to tell us something?' Tashi asked the men.

The scientists said nothing, just climbed into their vehicle and drove away.

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A week went past. The family was on edge. Tashi and Karma spent a lot of time away from the camp, cutting grass with a scythe, then carrying it back to the herd in wicker baskets. Tashi would pile the cuttings right over her head. She had a special technique to tie it in a teetering tower on her back.

'You look like a mobile haystack!' Karma laughed.

The foraging expeditions became longer and longer. The family's herd had worked its way through all the lush grass within the radius of a one-hour walk. Her parents

began to help with the grass collection, even though it meant leaving the camp vulnerable to an opportunistic thief or animal rustler.

'This place is a disaster,' her mother kept saying over and over. 'We will lose our herd this winter if we're not careful.'

The herd was not putting on enough weight. The animals were restless, tetchy with each other and their human guardians.

'They know they're being cheated out of their normal pasture,' Tashi said one night. 'They're not happy.'

Then, at dawn one morning, the ministry Toyota came back. The familiar truck full of soldiers followed it. Tashi was the first to spot them. She shook her family awake.

'Get up!' she told them urgently. Even Karma was quick to rise from his bed.

One of the men in the white lab coats got out and approached them with an attaché case in his hand. He walked into the tent and brought out some papers.

'Your herd is contaminated,' he said. 'We have an order to destroy it.'

A deep silence followed. Tashi was aware that even the yaks seemed to have become quiet, the normal lowing and grunting of early morning had mysteriously stopped.

'Contaminated?' Tashi's father said slowly. 'What on earth are you talking about?'

The man thrust some papers under Tashi's father's nose.



'Infested with parasites,' he snapped. 'Riddled with contagious diseases.'

He pointed at a long row of Chinese characters.

'Look at this list,' he said. 'Your herd must be destroyed immediately.'