

A LINE OF HOPE



By Emilie Drinkwater

LOCAL LORE SAYS THAT THIS valley is haunted by the ghost of a British woman. In the pre-Taliban 1970s, during a burst of climbing activity on the spectacular granite walls of Mir Samir, she is said to have fallen to her death from high on the peak. They say her abandoned body still hangs at the end of her rope somewhere on that steep, unforgiving face deep in the Hindu Kush mountains of Afghanistan.

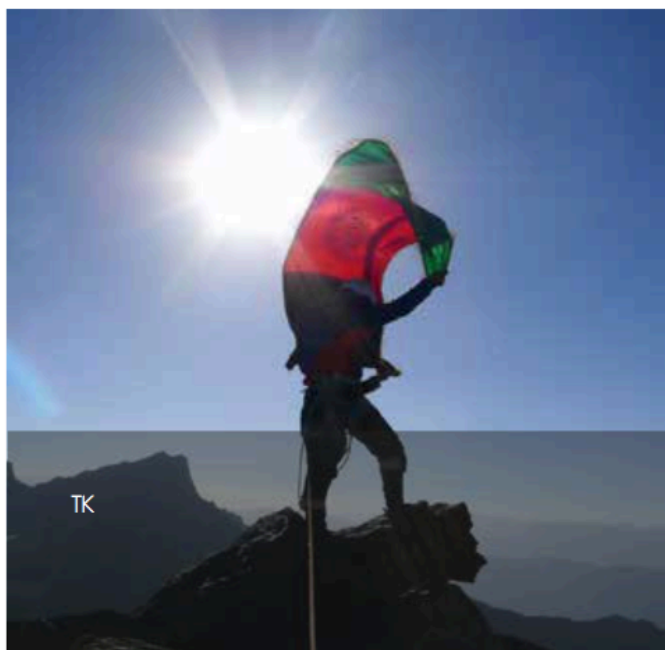
Our approach takes us through fields of pomegranate, poppies, and hemp and past the stone huts of shepherds and gem hunters toward the forgotten Mir Samir. I'm distracted by the potential and adventure and unclimbed routes in every direction. But my partners, thirteen young Afghan women, are far more concerned about what haunts this valley. They're uneasy. For them, this ghost story is nothing short of true, and some say they sense the woman's presence. *Jinns* are not taken lightly in Islamic culture. I think back to a vague warning I'd been given before leaving home: *Anything can happen at any time.*

We're climbing higher, pushing for the top and running short on time, chasing the sun's last rays of light and warmth. A ceaseless wind seeps through our jackets; weeks at high altitude has thinned our bodies and stretched our minds. There have been so many days I didn't want to be here. I longed for the ease of climbing familiar mountains, of speaking English, of eating my own food. I can't take the oily rice and grisly lamb anymore. I can't take the fast and confusing Persian banter. On the summit, the girls want to linger and celebrate, but the long descent concerns me. So much loose rock, such questionable anchors, only one headlamp between three of us. This stress is familiar, almost reassuring. It happens on every big climb. Risk and achievement become inseparable, tangled in hope and desire and determination. Reaching the top can mean so much—but only if you make it back down.

In base camp the next morning, we sip weak, sugary green tea and lean against warm rock. Shopira traces the contours of distant mountains with her finger. It's an outline of hope... and an impressive link-up!

"We go there, and there, and there," she says in Dari. It's not a question. "*Koohb ast!* — It is good! We go now?" The language barrier is difficult, but I know what she's saying. At 19, she is supposed to get married soon and have children, stay home, stop her education. Mountain climbing isn't what Afghans do, and certainly not Afghan women. But she's athletic and adventurous and driven. Climbing is what she *wants* to do.

Climbing is an opportunity to feel, for the first time, freedom. Freedom from oppression and violence, from decades of war, from the heat and pollution of Kabul. But in being here, these women have simply traded one danger for another: war for the possibility of falling, suicide bombs for being hit by loose rock, IEDs for shivering all night in the alpine far from their families and homes. Reaching the top of these peaks was once an inconceivable notion. Now it represents change and allows some sense of liberation from the expectations of life as an Afghan woman. Shopira



has risked everything to be here. The whole team has. They would trade it for nothing else.

On our last night in the mountains, as porters start arriving to help ferry loads back down, word reaches us that a Mullah in a neighboring valley has ordered all Westerners and four Afghan girls dead. Alleged or not, the threat is unsettling, and we must leave quickly. We pack our base camp and begin a silent descent in the dark. Each step brings us closer to home, but not to the same lives we'd left just three weeks earlier.

The girls are returning to a war zone, a place in which they're strangely comfortable. In a landscape of disemboweled helicopters and military convoys, war is all they've ever known. Some will get married, some will go back to school. Some will continue climbing, and others have decided it's not for them. The hope for change exists and there is great vulnerability in getting there. But each girl, hidden behind her hijab and long sleeves, will return with the knowledge that things can be different. Better. *Anything can happen at any time.*