

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Kingdom of Nepal

The chasms of rugged terrain of this little country spread out below my plane. Nepal was opened to foreigners only within the last fifty years. The plane was about to land in Kathmandu, a city whose name I once thought was made up by Doctor Seuss along with other nonsense words in his award-winning books for children. The city was not only real--I was here. I shivered with anticipation.

The olive-drab covered arms of the ground crew dropped the signal torches to the sides of their official Nepal uniforms and the airliner rolled gently to a stop against the wheel chocks. A compact tractor pushed the mobile stairs against the plane and a hundred seat belts clicked, freeing passengers to scramble for their carry-on bags.

Never once did I doubt that my vacation would be an adventure. Every changing scene made it so. All my weariness was swept away by thoughts of what the next few days held for me. I trembled a little, excited about Nepal's exotic appeal so well expressed in travel brochures.

After being cramped in a tourist-class seat for hours from Bangkok, I was free to stand upright. This was no place for my athletic stretch routine but I made do with flexing my arms and rotating my head from shoulder to shoulder.

I tugged at the wrinkles in my stone-washed denim jacket and smoothed the material of the matching slacks down my legs. I watched other weary passengers struggle grimly with their unwieldy bags and I tried to put on a more pleasant face. I wondered if I was wrong to assume we were all tourists. Except for a few swarthy men, I appeared to be the only dark-eyed person on the plane.

That momentarily amused me as it did back home where my wide, dark eyes and naturally dark olive skin contrasted so vividly with the blond blue-eyed Scandinavians. I was my Slavic father's only daughter. After briefly finger-combing my short, black hair, I put thoughts of my own appearance aside.

Taller passengers reached above me to fetch their luggage from the overhead bins. I patiently watched the sorting process, expecting to get mine

after others had retrieved their own.

"Are you Tina Burrows?" At my affirmative nod, my labeled backpack was thrust into my vacated aisle seat by an impatient fellow passenger, anxious to depart. I slung one padded strap over my shoulder and moved up the aisle to the exit. I paused to wait my turn on the open stairway.

I was one tourist fulfilling a dream of international travel. I used my savings from the past seven years for this trip and could only hope I'd find enough excitement to last when I went back home to work and save again.

A sweeping look assured me of my arrival in a foreign country. In wide-eyed wonder I scanned the black-eyed local people who waited below the stairs with upturned faces for the deplaning tourists. Faces were not many shades darker than my deep summer tan. My first impression of clean-shaven jaws proved to be an illusion when I reached the foot of the stairs and saw their dark facial hair merely blended with the dusky color of their skin.

Colorful caps clung tightly to the heads of short-haired Nepalis who scurried around to porter the luggage. Their thin bodies made them appear tall but most were only a few inches higher than my fifty-nine inches.

Colorfully dressed tourists spilled out of the plane and mingled with the Nepalis. Colors blended in active marble swirls on two levels. Like a two-tiered cake the cultures were clearly divided--the upper layer of tall light-featured Caucasian tourists and the lower layer of short dark-skinned Asian locals.

The top tier resembled multi-colored frosting, tourists restless in shiny new colorful jackets. The lower tier settled like molded chocolate, Nepalis swaddled in dark worn clothing. The height and pigment of ethnic origins made me wonder about economic layers in society that I had never thought of before.

The men were dressed in clothing like my folks donated to Goodwill fifteen years ago. Narrow cut polyester shirts once Rinso-bright, now muddy-colored from rare unions with grimy wash water, hung loosely on their shoulders. Lively patterns on pants lost their distinguishing features beneath a shadowy gray.

A square corner tear flapped from the elbow on the blurry red and black checkered shirt of a harried man as he piled luggage on a cart for a smartly dressed elderly couple.

I gazed, wonderingly, at women wrapped in yards of brightly colored cloth, mysteriously tucked in place with no apparent seams. For the most part they were expressionless women who stood almost motionless while their turbaned companions gestured orders to waiting porters.

A dot of vermilion powder freshly vivid in the middle of their foreheads marked the Hindus in the crowd. One impassive woman held a swaddled infant in her fleshy embrace while an older toddler shyly clung to its mother's filmy wrappings of brilliant blue flowered lawn cloth.

I searched the crowd for women I'd seen in photographs of Nepal.

Women in trim black dresses with brightly striped aprons--Sherpanis, women of the Sherpa clans--but found none. The Sherpas lived in the rugged area closer to Mount Everest. I didn't expect to see them in Kathmandu but I was disappointed that I was correct in my expectation.

An interest in Nepal began three years ago when my college roommate, Kay Lauren, accepted a position in the university at Kathmandu. Her enthusiasm sparked my interest and read all the material found in the library where I work. Two books were especially informative.

An anthropologist at the Kathmandu University described the daily lives of Sherpas, who attracted worldwide attention carrying burdens for mountain climbers in high Himalayan altitudes without oxygen. New Zealand scientists described the features of Mount Everest National Park and the efforts to prevent destruction of the fragile mountain ecology and ultimately the economy of the Sherpas.

My Peak I Tracer backpack hung awkwardly from my left shoulder. The bag was almost as big as me but I had carried it like a needed friend on many camping trips into the wilderness areas of my home state of Minnesota. Somehow in this strange place, the pack seemed heavier than usual. I stood in the line to customs, wondering how I would find my way to the hotel I planned to stay at overnight. From there I would contact my college friend to make further plans.

Kay moved to several university towns since our graduation. We kept in close touch those seven years and when I saved enough for this trip, I wrote telling her I would call when I arrived. What fun to be seeing Kay again!

I scanned the faces in the crowded room. The individual concentration of each was on one goal--getting through customs. Curiously, I found one exception. A man against the far wall of the waiting room retained an unwavering scrutiny. My gaze flitted past him and then back, momentarily startled to discover he was staring at me.

His hair was thick and brown, with a wavy strand falling rakishly toward his bushy eyebrow. His face was square and clean shaven, with a dark tan. Deep slashes ran from his nose to the corners of his thin lips, the ends turned up ever so slightly. Not devilishly handsome, he struck me as strong and protective. A worn leather jacket lay loosely over his broad shoulders, opened to reveal a bright green knit shirt.

At first I thought I was mistaken but I watched his eyes, certain he was studying me with intent contemplation. His look was not exactly one of admiration, but was not unfriendly. I gave him a wide cordial smile which seemed to catch his attention. Suddenly realizing he was caught staring, his eyes narrowed and he turned away to deny his interest.

Well, pardon me for flirting! Nervously I looked about to see if anyone had witnessed my silly indiscretion. To rid my mind of his intrusion and redirect my thoughts, I dropped my eyes and studied the callouses of nearby

sandaled feet.

After a moment, I casually glanced back at him, wondering if he really noticed me at all. He was engaged in conversation with a native who had close-cropped black hair covered tightly by a colorful cotton cap. With a slight nod the swarthy man's black eyes searched for me and when his eyes met mine, he guiltily pulled his gaze away as if he'd been caught stealing.

A fearsome prickle skittered up my back. As a tourist I was warned to be on guard against those who prey on foreigners. I brought my pack around under my arm and clutched it a little tighter. Thieves expected single women to be easy victims.

The thought of being scrutinized for theft was unnerving. What puzzled me was why I was chosen from the more prosperous tourists all around me.

I stared at the two men for a long time and although they didn't look at me again, they remained in serious conversation. I had an uncanny feeling by their refusal to look my way that I was the subject they discussed.

An odd dread crept up my spine. I tried to stay calm and be realistic. Looking wasn't an assault so what did I have to fear? They looked like clean cut men. I chastised myself for thinking foolish thoughts. My first hour in this strange and exotic country was not the time to weave fearful scenarios. I tried to put such thoughts aside knowing I was affected by my isolation and ignorance of a strange country.

I tugged the waistband of the pants of my stone-washed denim suit to a more comfortable position and smoothed my red silk blouse. The thin strap of my small envelope purse cut into my shoulder and I stroked the stressed spot while I waited my turn in the line for customs.

The line moved slowly and my every muscle poised for action. I'm not good at inactivity, although my job as reference librarian did not require much physical activity. I was determined to stay in good physical condition for summer hiking and camping so I spent three days a week on exercise routines at a local health club.

Waiting, for me, is tiring. I used the delay to go through a series of isometric exercises I was taught to do when faced with long waits I could not avoid.

My muscles tightened as I pulled in my stomach and placed my feet slightly apart. I clenched my right fist and forearm, bringing them against my chest. Then spreading my tensed fingers, I slowly raised my splayed hand and brought it to the side of my face.

I turned my palm along my jaw and moved it up across my ear, running combing fingers through my short black hair, keeping a hard and continuous tension on every muscle in my entire body. I teased my scalp with firm fingertips and slid my open hand down to gently knead the back of my neck. The action gave me the excuse to swivel my head and work the stiffness from neck muscles at the same time.

Then I relaxed and returned my arm to my side, shifting the backpack so I could repeat the exercise with my left arm. This was no substitute for regular workouts but was effective in preserving muscle tone. After the tiring plane ride, my cramped body responded to the stretching with renewed energy and lifted spirits.

When I was halfway through my left hand cycle, an unusual noise erupted in another line. The crowd frantically separated to let someone pass. A small man rushed through and I tightened my protective grip on my bag. It was too crowded for me to step out of his way. Before his bony elbow thrust me sideways I could see he was dressed in the dark homespun clothing.

Even with my shoulder turned to protect me from direct impact, I was hit hard. My arms curled around my bag and I was flung sideways into a tall man whose firm body held me upright. His large warm hands rested around the points of my shoulders.

An apology for bumping into him formed in my mind. Before I caught my breath to speak, I looked up to see him staring at the back of the running man.

In the second my hands touched the worn leather, I realized what I was up against. This was the man who studied me moments ago across the room.

"Thank you for catching me," I said. He looked into my face as I pushed myself away.

Curious gray eyes slid over my features. A glint of recognition made us both hesitate. For a moment I thought he was going to ask where we'd met before. My guard rose in defense of any devious scheme he might have in mind. A warning ran up my spine and tickled the hairs on my nape. My heartbeat accelerated in apprehension.

After he looked me over at close range, resignation settled on his features. I was totally unprepared for his apology.

"I'm sorry, Miss. That's no way to be welcomed to Kathmandu."

His voice was all male in a resounding baritone that galvanized the portentous tide of foreboding that flowed through my body.

"Are you all right?" He demanded with increasing pressure on my shoulders.

I nodded. He accepted my word, dropped his grip and walked away. For a faltering moment I stood immobilized. A wicked touch of vanity sent a sweet longing for more interest from his retreating manly frame.

I didn't have time to dwell on regrets in the sweaty press of humanity. I flowed toward the customs agent with the anxious stream of fellow passengers who had deplaned the Royal Nepal Airliner.

Finally at the desk, two black eyes narrowed on me with a patient stare. Through his courteous tight smile, he sung out a melodious string of words I could not hope to understand. At my baffled expression, he repeated the words more slowly and more loudly than before. After several attempts with different languages, he gestured for me to wait while he went to find someone who could

speak English. Other agents responded negatively and I began to wonder if he would find anyone to help him.

My breath caught when I saw the man I bumped into weaving through the crowd to address the agent. It would have been less than honest to pretend I had no physical response to his unquestionable attraction. He nodded his honey brown head in my direction and the agent came back to his desk leading the tall stranger. Uncontained warmth spread through my system at the relief brought by his approach.

"I'm Paul Andrews," he said, without offering his hand. "Want me to translate for you?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, please," I nodded, sliding my passport and visitor's form across the desk. "I'm Tina Burrows. Thank you very much."

My documents were examined by the agent and Paul answered his questions while I favorably compared his abundant honey brown mane to the agent's straight black hair. Necessary questions were repeated to me and immediately translated to the agent.

"What is the purpose of your visit?"

"Vacation."

"How long do you plan to stay?"

"Three weeks."

"Have you made arrangements for a place to stay?"

"Yes, the Shangrila Hotel."

"Are you trekking in the Khumbu Himal?"

I couldn't answer that. I wasn't exactly certain where the Himal was or how to get there. The tall man calmly repaired my ignorance. Tourists often walk the trail up toward the mountain climbers' camp. His low husky voice vibrated around me.

"If I can arrange something, I hope to go."

"You must apply for special permits," he informed me and nodded to the agent.

The agent filed the form on a spindle and in pompous dignity stamped my passport with a loud thump. He slid it across the counter with a wave to the next passenger in line. I looked up to thank Paul Andrews for his help and saw his wide shoulders angling away through the crowd. His hips were narrow and his long legs easily maneuvered between people when he turned his shoulders. Obviously he was a man who knew what he wanted to do and did it.

In a furtive glance at him over my shoulder, I caught his thoughtful look before he turned away. A traitorous burst of warmth fled through me and I felt as if I had indulged in another minor indiscretion.

I calmed the swift pulse of excitement in my chest. How could a stranger affect me so physically? He certainly aroused my curiosity but the contemplative look in his eyes held a promise that left me with a cautious

sensation.

A battery of peddlers pushed their wares into my face as I made my way to the exit. Dark eyes begged me to buy trinkets. Their clothes were a ragged conglomeration of homespun cloth and torn faded shirts. I closed my mind and moved on. As I pushed past, a wrinkled man with leathery skin stretched across his bony frame swung expertly around me to dangle colorful belts in front of my eyes.

"You buy?"

I looked at his ragged clothes and dirty bare feet and felt my refusal would deny him a square meal.

His practiced eye noticed my hesitation and he pressed his advantage in a tone urgent with emotion, "You pretty. This pretty. Belong you."

I shook my head and dropped my eyes. After that I tried not to look at anyone, but I had to find a ride for the five miles to Kathmandu. The street was a wild milling of buses, cars, taxis, rickshaws and the oddest three-wheel vehicles I'd ever seen.

A sense of direction escaped me and I couldn't decide which way to go. Confusion reigned in the helpless shrug of my shoulders. I couldn't seem to find my way out of this foreign tangle to look for the transportation I needed.

In response to my conjured appeal, the tall man with the stone gray eyes and honey brown hair appeared at my side. At first my ego expanded to the size of a hot air balloon at the thought of Paul Andrew's renewed attention. I could not decide what there was about him that fascinated me. Then I reminded myself he was a stranger, his lack of interest shown in his fathomless gray eyes.

His presence was one I could not deny. He stood beside me, primitively male, powerful and protective.

"Do you work here?" I had to know what his association was to the airport. It seemed imperative for me to establish a connection.

"Not exactly, I have a freight company."

"I'm looking for a bus into Kathmandu," I blurted, "My hotel room is reserved for the night." After I volunteered that information, I realized that wasn't his business.

"It won't be so crowded on the other side of the street," he insisted. That struck me as a foregone conclusion. No place could be as crowded as this. I didn't reject his steerage. He took my elbow and led me across.

The crowd parted like the Red Sea. I thought the dark-skinned people were frightened by his towering height. At a closer look I could see they weren't intimidated. The way he carried himself earned the right to command and they respected him immediately and moved aside. His outstretched hand touched some shoulders in a familiar way and they responded with courtesy. He seemed to be directing their attention to me. Soft spoken words in their language turned their approving smiles my way.

When we reached a clearing, he straightened to his full six-foot height and turned to me. He considered me with a measured look and remarked, "My, you are tiny."

For me Tiny was a scornful nickname and I anger welled up to straighten my backbone.

"No. I'm Tina," I snapped, assertively throwing back my shoulders. I was dubbed 'Tiny' by hometown six-foot Swedes, but each time someone used the nickname, I felt insulted and for some repressed reason I could not explain, I wanted to punch them out.

I glowered at him as I searched for a suitable rebuke.

He made a hasty evaluation of my indignation, rather sympathetically, I thought, then his expression closed as his gaze dropped.

"The buses are noisy, smelly affairs, Miss. You're welcome to ride with me to Kathmandu."

What could I say? He spoke English. That made him easier to trust than the men around me who spoke languages I couldn't understand. Everyone he spoke to treated him with respect.

"Do you know the Shangrila Hotel?" All I knew about it was its rating as a Four Star accommodation.

"Yes, it's not far from my place," he answered.

He was no tourist. His features hung expressionless as he waited for my answer. I wanted to get to my hotel and was afraid to communicate with other drivers. This courteous man appeared competent and trustworthy. I thrust aside all previous misgivings about his actions.

"I accept your offer. Thank you."

"Where's the rest of your luggage?"

"This is it," I told him, indicating my backpack.

He eyed me skeptically, then his bushy dark eyebrows shot up and he sent me a dazzling grin, "That's real light for an American...."

He hesitated, as if he was going to make a further remark. Confusion flashed across his eyes and the grin faded. For a moment he stared thoughtfully at me while the skin puckered between those thick dark eyebrows. They almost formed a straight line across his forehead.

His expression was coldly impersonal but I liked him anyway. I couldn't decide if I was drawn to him because he was good looking or a welcome port in this confusing storm of bustling humanity.

Grudging admiration lingered in his eyes. I couldn't imagine why. My imagination was playing tricks on me. His expression turned to something more like recognition and then resignation. Those changes made no sense at all. I gave up my character study. I should be studying the Nepalis anyway. They were the ones I came halfway around the globe to see.

He motioned to his car and I headed for the right side, alarmed that the car was parked the wrong way on the street. My questioning frown brought a

quirk to the corner of his mouth and I saw my mistake.

"We drive on the left, like the Brits," he said, as I backed away from the driver's seat.

He waited until I settled in the passenger seat before he folded his long body behind the steering wheel, fitting his knees into the limited space. The interior was uncluttered, the carpets threadbare, the windows lined with wild colorful decals that had to be read from the outside. He curiously marked my scrutiny of his decorations.

Tightening of his lips put a resigned set to his chiseled jaw. I detected uneasiness disturbing his muscular frame without a noticeable twitch revealing itself. A self-consciousness settled over him. After the cordial offer of a ride, he withdrew his friendship and distanced himself in a way that moved him beyond the simple space between us in the seats of his car.

"It's a half hour drive into the city," he noted, dryly, as if resenting it.

"I can still take a bus, if you don't have the time," I said, turning quickly to look at him. Why did he offer the ride? His attitude puzzled me and I wasn't about to upset his schedule.

"No. No," he said, putting his hand on my arm and fastening his eyes on mine. "Things aren't like you'd find them at home."

"I hope not," I said. I couldn't help but grin. "If this isn't going to be different, I could have saved a lot of money by staying home."

The steely grayness of his eyes softened and he chuckled. I shrugged, snorting in pleasure at his appreciation of my statement. He turned back to his driving.

"I live an hour from the Minneapolis airport," I said. The distance to Kathmandu didn't matter as long as I got there. I didn't notice his mood change.

The thought that I might be a victim of something perilous didn't cross my mind. His manner was polite and he had been most helpful. I trusted him.

The engine purred to life and I turned to watch the traffic. Paul slowly weaved the car past the maze of black-swathed bodies, odd looking three-wheeled vehicles and crowded buses. The untidy building we pulled away from was Tribhuvan International Airport outside of Kathmandu, touted with pride in this struggling third world nation.

Tall solitary trees dotted the rolling landscape between fields of cabbages and onions. I wasn't sure what to expect but I was ready to absorb all the information I could find. I remembered what I'd learned about Nepal.

"The latitude is the same as northern Florida but the altitude is equal to Reno, Nevada," I said. "Does that make it warm and dry?" I sneaked a look at my onerous companion. His brows were furrowed in profound concentration.

"This is a tremendous adventure!" I exclaimed, not waiting for his answer. He appeared to be wrestling with a serious problem.

The grim look on his face wasn't pleasant. A muscle twitched in his jaw,

reminding me of my board chairman facing the city council at the annual review. I must have stared because I caught his attention.

"You've done your homework. Do you travel much?" Paul asked, bouncing an impersonal glance at me when he turned onto the main highway toward the city.

"Hardly ever," I clipped, a little defensive of my background. Honestly, I was never more than two hundred miles from my Minnesota home in all my twenty-nine years. There are many beautiful places to hike to during the Minnesota summers. Even the frigid winters yield their own brand of compelling beauty. I thought about the cold weather I left behind.

The northwest winds had frozen the ground before the first of December but no snow had fallen. Driving on icy packed snow was the only unpleasant part of going to my job at the city library. There would be snow aplenty before I returned home in January. When snow fell in Minnesota it stayed on the ground until the spring melt.

In Nepal snow was limited to the lofty Himalayas. I saw them from the airplane but I would like to get a closer view. I thought briefly of a trek in the Himal--now that I knew what the Himal was.

I looked around. People on foot were going about their personal business just like my neighbors at home, but different in a strangely careless way. They rode bicycles, pulled carts, and carried baskets suspended along their backs by bands across their foreheads.

Three-wheeled contraptions looked like a combination of a car's rear axle with the steering and front wheels of a gasoline driven garden tractor. Parts obviously from different kinds of machines were combined to make an odd assortment of motorized vehicles. They sped beside the foot traffic with little concern for safety. Paul's strong hands steered skillfully around the careening traffic. His posture was alert and I settled back in confidence.

Dilapidated trucks pattered shakily along. Antiquated buses looked more like sheet-metal boxes on wheels. They swerved recklessly around us, pouring out black swirls of diesel carbon as if they were squids enveloping pursuers in blinding inky blackness. Exhaust burned my nostrils.

"What odd transportation." I was surprised at the haphazard design and state of disrepair. Paul twisted to give me a full-faced arrogant glare.

"Look close at the vehicles in Kathmandu," Paul said, "You'll see results of real genius."

It was rather unexpected to have him defend the people of Nepal. They apparently were special to him. At least he had some kind of heart and that was encouraging. It was reassuring to discover that much about him, not that it gave him any surface charm.

Paul suddenly became irritated. He began to honk the horn incessantly and frequently pulled around, in spite of oncoming traffic. Viewing the clamoring vehicles from the wrong side of the road frightened me. I held my

breath. I wasn't going to say anything more and make his driving worse. He must have noticed my clutched fingers because he settled patiently into the traffic flow.

He was a gloomy companion and wore on my tired nerves. I was anxious to get to the hotel so I wouldn't have to see him again. I don't know why he'd initially been so appealing. He was spoiling my excitement. I'd feel better when I contacted Kay. I'd call her as soon as I got settled in my room.

"I should have stayed with Kay Lauren," I grumbled suddenly, louder than I intended, "She offered me a room."

"You know the professor at Nepal University?" Paul jerked his head around to face me with a scowl. He showed instant interest in this new information. He pinned me with glowering eyes to make sure we referred to the same person.

At my nod he returned his attention to the road. I saw his brow furrow. It struck me that some facts were rearranging themselves under that honey brown hair. He looked at me again with a dawn of understanding lighting the rough edges of his features.

"You're the college roommate?" His attention went back to his driving when he caught my affirming smile.

"She told you about me?" I asked, thinking what a coincidence our meeting was.

"I've heard something of her 'roomy's' exploits," he agreed. His flat tone indicated they were not impressive. The set of his jaw refused further discussion.

I didn't understand his reactions to my attempts at conversation. He didn't have dibs on my college roommate. I intended to spend as much time with Kay as she would give. We had to catch up on important events of the past. I sat back and kept my eyes on the red brick buildings and bright flowering plants splashed along the way.

"This is it." Paul pulled the car to a stop in a curved driveway in front of a charming stucco building covered with flowering vines. White blossomed oleander with slender leaves vied for attention among mounds of bright red poinsettias at haphazard intervals along the walk. A camellia flashed bright pink flowers above a circle of spreading dark green ground cover. Clusters of red berries delighted birds on pyracantha bushes beside a lamp post. The setting struck me as a true shangrila.

Paul stepped out, and like the gallant knight I admired, he opened my door and helped me out. His features were cold and hard as armor. His gray eyes were as unemotional as polished steel. When he retrieved my bag from the back seat, I reached for it. He jerked it away and grunted.

My mouth dropped open at his rudeness. I wondered what I'd done to bring on his frostiness. He marched past me into the lobby and handed the bag to a short dark man, who spoke what I supposed was Nepalese. Paul

noded to the desk clerk so I signed the register and stood stiffly at his side. He had taken over like a sponsoring tour guide.

"Angelo will show you to your room." He pronounced the porter's name angle, instead of the more familiar English angel. "You'll have time to freshen up before dinner," he spread his hand toward me in an abrupt gesture of dismissal.

I glared at him but he was walking away. He was the most arrogant man I'd ever met. I had to admire how his retreating broad shoulders tapered to slim hips and long lean legs. His bare feet, sun darkened but uncalloused, were strapped in leather sandals. Too bad his manners didn't match the perfection of his shape.

"Good man," Angelo remarked when he saw my approval of Paul's body.

I shrugged and followed the Nepali porter up the stairs. He placed my bag inside the door and turned on the lights. He smiled widely and spoke several sentences in a language that sounded like music. I spread my hands and shrugged.

With a knowing smile he placed his palms together, bowed his chin to his fingertips, and murmured "Nam ah stay."

I offered a weak imitation and mumbled to him with a hesitant smile. I closed the door behind him and hurried to freshen up.

The bed didn't sag when I bounced lightly to test the mattress and I flopped down for a feline stretch. With a deep breath I sat up and looked at my backpack. There was no time to waste. I decided not to unpack until I contacted Kay.

Interesting things were out there in Kathmandu and I needed help to find them. I was surprised there was no telephone in my room. Oh well, the room had hot and cold running water and a comfortable bed. I slipped the room key into my purse and with renewed lightness, went down the flight of stairs to the lobby.

The extra exertion made my shoulders stick to my blouse. I should have changed into something cooler. The high ceiling fan, slowly circulated the air not far above the heads of towering tourists. In examining the other things around the room, I fastened my gaze on a familiar brown head.

Paul stood talking to a short skinny man with sharp features and long black hair. They both looked wiry and tough, but Paul's presence held strong and potent overtones.

I shouldn't have noticed that. No purpose in too much admiration. He didn't let people get too familiar, that was quite apparent by the invisible barrier he kept around him. Turning quickly with a touch of self reproach, I continued my search for a telephone.

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*In some corners of the world, people still operate on century-old traditions. Tickpay wondered at the sense of it. She had been a traditionally excited, and apprehensive, bride on her wedding day ten years ago. It had not been her choice to marry Kalle Laange, the son of a Tibetan merchant. That was the prerogative of the parents and mutually agreed upon when she was less than two years old.*

*Her husband's business flourished and he built a pretentious home in a pleasant valley outside Kathmandu. In the well appointed room she had endured another beating--a result of her husband's sick jealous mind.*

*"You will do as I say," Kalle grunted, "You will not disobey me again." He stared for several moments at his wife with wild demented eyes before he left her.*

*Tickpay fingered the turquoise that hung on the tight braided string around her neck. The necklace represented the wealth she had brought to the union when she was given in marriage and it was hers. She lifted the necklace heavy with stones and copper and laid it on the chest beside her bed. The wealth she could do without. Other things were far more important.*

*She laid her hands against her stomach and a wave of hatred suddenly replaced the fear that had enveloped her body at the thought of losing another opportunity to bear a child. With the hatred came a swift resolve.*

*She wrapped a clean tunic and blouse in a thin blanket and left the room. Somehow she had to save this child.*

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"Tina, I'm glad you arrived safely." Kay sounded her bubbly self over the phone. "No trouble getting to your hotel?" The bubbling paused significantly.

"Paul Andrews gave me a ride. He said he knew you." I couldn't get Paul out of my mind knowing he was acquainted with Kay. I waited for her to clue me in on his character.

"Why yes, Paul is a friend of mine. And of Harry Nelson, as well. He's the sociologist I wrote you about studying the Sherpas in the Himal."

"I'd never guess Paul was sociable, let alone a sociologist," I remarked dryly.

"No, not Paul. Harry's the sociologist. Paul owns a freighting company."

"Oh." Paul told me that at the airport but the fact wasn't especially enlightening. I couldn't get up much enthusiasm for that little tidbit and my lack of it showed.

I didn't say a word so Kay continued, "We're all fond of Paul. He knows the people and the country and is easy to get along with."

'You could have fooled me,' I thought. I shrugged a barely audible, "Humph."

"What's the matter, Tina?" Kay heard the bleakness in my voice. "How

did you meet him, anyway?"

"I bumped into him at the airport." I was thrown into his firm male body, actually. The details weren't the subject for a phone conversation. I had too many conflicting emotions about the meeting to really understand the details myself.

"I'm surprised he made such a bad impression. That's unfortunate. He knows the local languages," Kay said. He'd demonstrated that at the airport and I was well aware of his value as an interpreter.

"I don't know what to think of him, Kay. Maybe I'm just too tired to appreciate a favor. I'd hoped to be visiting you tonight." I didn't try to hide my disappointment. The pause was equally uncomfortable on both ends of the line.

"Look, Tina, I'm terribly sorry, but we just can't get together tonight." By now all of Kay's bubbles had gone flat. A guarded curiosity replaced them. She expected me to say something. I was too puzzled by her rejection to think clearly.

I felt let down but the trip was tiring so I was willing to stay in my room and rest. After all, Kay hadn't known the exact time of my arrival.

"Look, we'll get together tomorrow, OK? I'll show you some sights in Kathmandu." Kay cut me off. "I'll call you tomorrow. Goodbye."

I said 'Goodbye' to a dial tone. I tossed the receiver into its hanger, stunned at the brush off. The artistic Nepalese message above the door blurred in front of my glazed eyes.

That couldn't have been my friend, Kay, I just spoke to--friendly Kay who was always amenable to a gab session when we spent a few days together. I racked my brain for a reason for her disinterest. Feeling rejected I turned to the stairs with drooping shoulders.

Blocking my way was tall, thoughtful Paul Andrews.