

CHAPTER TWO

Abandoned in Kathmandu

Paul stood unyielding before me. Without the slightest bend of his muscular physique he brought his masterful presence down around me. He held no hint of disdain for my diminutive size and my traitorous pride soared under his accepting gaze. My ambivalent reactions to him rendered me speechless. In a flash of distrust I waited, uncertain of what would follow.

"Are you ready for dinner?" he asked. His features were hard and he didn't impress me as a pleasant dinner companion. I needed tender loving care, not willful hardness.

I gave him a blank look while considering the alternatives. The fact that his face was a familiar one in this foreign place should have been heartening. Instead, the prospect of spending any time with an arrogant, stoic stranger was depressing.

"I'm not hungry." I felt such loneliness at Kay's rejection I wanted to cry. I tried to step around him and go to my room.

Paul caught my arm and turned me to face him. He tipped my head back with two fingers under my chin. His face was tilted a little to the side, with a studied expression. When he peered into my face, confusion took over and I faltered in my step.

"What's wrong?" His voice was low. He sounded honestly interested.

I was shocked at the unexpected concern and a bit repelled by his attention. After his arrogant dismissal earlier in the lobby, his thoughtfulness seemed contrived. My immediate impulse was to refuse. I raised my chin imperceptibly in unspoken disdain. His fingers lingered beneath my chin when he no longer had to force me to hold his gaze. They remained so close I could feel their heat as he waited for my answer.

"Nothing." The denial was for the tingling in my skin that he no longer touched. I was startled that the pleasant feeling subdued my melancholy. His hand dropped to his side and his cool gray eyes searched mine while I glared with indifference.

"Then at least join me while I eat my dinner. I have a table for two." He jerked his head toward the hotel dining room.

I swayed slightly toward him and his hand went to my elbow. With a strange elation filling my breast, I was letting him take me into the dining

room. To spend the evening feeling sorry for myself held no appeal at all.

Round tables, covered in white linen, resembled large water lilies floating on the sea green carpet. Large leafed plants provided privacy between the tables and brought a coolness to the room that bathed me in its calmness. Delicious aromas assaulted my senses. Paul held a chair for me and I was seated beside him.

"Sure you don't want to eat?" he asked, his tone filled with consideration.

"The food smells different." The smell was appetizing and tasting the foreign food was top on my list of adventures.

The source of the mouth-watering smell on the plates at the neighboring tables looked like rice, spicy curried meat, creamed cauliflower, tomatoes, and a pickled sauce. My appetite was piqued. I gave an consenting nod. Paul beckoned to the waiter and ordered in Nepalese.

I listened to the song-like words with rapt attention.

Paul's attitude had changed several times since I first saw him. He was pensive, friendly, cool, thoughtful, demanding, and indifferent, with each trait switching like stations on my television remote control. The changes annoyed and fascinated me in ways I didn't understand.

"Would you like to try some chang?" Paul politely inquired. "That's the local beer brewed from rice." His thick eyebrows crinkled a second before he added, "I think Kay mentioned some beer parties in college. You'll find this to be a different brew."

The chang appeared almost immediately on a small round tray in the hands of the shiny-haired waiter. Set in front of me it looked crystal clear as water and slightly fizzy in the ordinary restaurant water glass. I looked up to offer a thank you to the waiter and caught his glance skip from me to Paul.

I contemplated the secret exchange while I studied the liquid. I rolled a small sip over my tongue to test its potency.

"Well," he queried? "What do you think?" His gray eyes challenged.

Gone was the cold grimness from his brooding depths. What a contrast from the earlier looks he'd given me. How could honest people change moods so abruptly?

I decided my disturbed feeling resulted from travel weariness. I sipped again at the chang. Its fizzy sharpness was pleasant. There was no hint of the hops influence like the familiar Minnesota beers. I smiled at Paul with renewed resolution to accept an evening of pleasant relaxation.

"Definitely not like home," I judged, "but I'm not home. I'm on an adventure and this beer--chang did you call it?--is a good way to begin." I raised my glass toward his in a salute of friendly camaraderie and took another careful sip, watching him over the rim of my glass.

His face was expressionless under my study. His appraising eyes swept across my features as if to verify each one. It was a strange sensation. I was glad I had two eyes, two ears, a nose and a mouth.

The chang wove a spell I didn't want to break. Pulling my thoughts away from the overpowering effect of Paul's nearness, I listened to the conversations going on around us. He seemed content to watch me concentrate on the words of this musical language. He made only few attempts to encourage my questions regarding our surroundings.

We ate in silence and Paul watched curiously as I tried each type of food. I smiled with a nod of approval at each new taste I encountered. When I finished sampling them all, I curled back untroubled into my chair.

"I want to thank you for the delightful meal," was all I could say.

"Are you game for a language lesson tonight?" Paul asked with a forward nod.

"What language is it to be?" I grinned. The chang was taking effect and I felt impish. I knew the language of Nepal had several dialects. Other distinct peoples, such as Indians, Pakistanis, Tibetans, and Sherpas, spoke languages all their own.

"You're very perceptive," he said. "Let's go for Sherpa. Some Ramo Sherpas are down from the Khumba. You'll enjoy seeing them dance and sing."

He pulled my chair away. Placing his hand lightly on my back, Paul gently urged me toward the rear entrance. We stopped in the shadowed hallway when a young girl in a dark tunic handed Paul some folded cloth.

"You coming dance?" she asked and smiled at his affirmative nod.

"Sunny, this is Tina Burrows." He turned and explained to me, "Tina, meet Sunny Sherpa. She handles yaks."

Sunny was young and about my height. She wore the dark tunic and striped apron I had seen pictured on Sherpa women. Questions came to mind but I couldn't put them into words before she turned to go.

"I late," she said softly. "Burrah waiting." She hurried off.

Paul handed me the folded cloth.

"Put this on. It's a Sherpani dress. In there." he pointed to the door marked with a woman's skirted silhouette. At my hesitation he urged, "Just slip it over your clothes and tie the apron around you. It'll fit. Go on."

I took a moment to inspect the woven texture of the black tunic comparing its roughness to the smooth bright apron. Then I pushed the door aside. It had been a long time since I played dress up. I thought it might be fun.

The black tunic was sleeveless and Paul was right. It did fit over my denim pantsuit with a little material to spare. My reflection surprised me. I grinned at the darkened effect made by the faint yellow glow of a single incandescent light bulb above the sink. My round face didn't resemble Sunny's but my features had a strangely foreign appearance. I stepped back and smoothed the skirt down over my hips. The toes of my black Reebok walking shoes peeked out from beneath the garment. I tied the apron, picked up my small purse by its strap and proudly stepped out into the dim hallway as a

Sherpani.

At my appearance Paul paused a moment, flashing a brief tremor of approval. He ushered me toward the rear entrance of the restaurant in what seemed unnecessary haste. My full stomach and the alcoholic chang hampered my reactions and his guidance was helpful. His car was in the dark street near the door and he skillfully led me around the holes in the sidewalk.

In the quick maneuvering my purse slipped from my grasp. I faltered when I couldn't hold on to the long-strapped envelope of a bag.

"I'd better make that more secure," Paul said. "Give me your apron." He took the purse from my hand.

As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I watched what Paul was doing with my purse.

He strung a tie of the colorful apron through the ring on one end of my purse. He fastened the other tie to the ring on the other end. Laying the slim envelope smoothly behind the top of the apron band, he formed an effective hidden money belt. It was a clever way to secure my valuables. When he was satisfied it was firmly fastened, he placed the apron against my front and reached around with both hands to tie the strings behind me.

This maneuver brought my bundled body against his firm male form, like a parent holds a child to dress it. I docilely placed my nose and cheek against his hard chest and held my breath. I was aware of his hard, rippling muscles and my dulled senses slowly magnified the movement of every one.

Suddenly he stopped fiddling with the apron strings behind my back, belatedly aware of our intimate position.

I giggled. That definitely was a result of the chang. I never giggled before in my life--never.

Paul put his hands on my shoulders and held me away to peer into my face. He glowered at my amusement. The pale glow of a distant street light only dully illuminated his features. I tried to perceive his expression but the truth lay hidden in hollows of darkness.

I couldn't stop giggling at the thought of this powerful man tying apron strings like the Warner cartoon goose dressing her overgrown Baby Huey.

Paul grabbed me, pinning my arms at my sides and lifted me up. He smothered my giggle under his pressing mouth. The kiss was hard. I bent my elbows and held on to the sides of his jacket.

His jacket was leather, soft and supple. The chang deepened my sense of awareness beyond reality. The kiss was above me, totally unreal. I paid more serious notice to Paul's parted lips when he leaned back to look at me.

A look of disbelief lingered across his face. I hoped he didn't regret the kiss. His arms slowly relaxed. I slipped to the ground.

"That chang is really something," I murmured. We studied each other for a moment. Only his sharpest features were visible in the dim light and they were still and harsh. He remained ominously silent.

"I had way too much." Too much chang, of course. Way too much to keep me quiet. I stepped back and babbled on.

Paul's expression wasn't readable in the dim light. He put his arms down with a gruff reminder to tie my apron strings.

I reached for the strings behind me and giggled.

"I'd like to know what's so funny," he growled. But he didn't wait for me to explain. He crushed me to his chest again, bruising my lips with a punishing kiss. With my arms pressed at my sides, I couldn't struggle. Before I could decide how to object, or if I wanted to, he put me down and pushed me toward his car.

"Get in. We'll miss the Sherpas if we don't get moving."

My emotions were confused as I climbed into the car. I tucked my yak-wool dress against my legs before Paul slammed the door. I faced front, my eyes covered with a stunned glaze, unable to see the cars and three-wheeled vehicles Paul dodged on the poorly lighted street.

I tried to slow my heartbeat so I could think clearly. His kisses had been punishing, hard and relentless against my lips. Not one tender romantic notion accompanied either kiss. If I hadn't been summarily thrust aside I would have considered each of them an attack and fled.

"Forget that ever happened," his voice was a low growl, filled with regret.

"All of it. Forget it." His open palms struck the steering wheel in a deprecating gesture of self-disgust. His attitude chilled the air, forming a cool harsh atmosphere I couldn't begin to pierce.

I stared at him for a long time trying to read some sensible reality into his actions. I turned helplessly to face the dark road ahead.

"O.K., O.K. It's forgotten." The bruise lingered on my lips. I would have enjoyed a lingering kiss, I thought. I wasn't immune to his male attraction. The chang did affect my good sense. Why should his kisses mean anything to me? He was a stranger and our homes were on opposite sides of the world.

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In a darkened corner behind a row of bundled wood, Tickpay lay in despondent lethargy. Her battered body was evidence that she had not made good her first escape. Her uncle had rescued her and brought her to this Sherpa haven. With loving care he tended to her bruises.

She held a necklace out to him which he clutched to his breast for a reverent moment before he noticed the fractured stone. With a frown, he bade her to wait, promising with renewed fervor that he would find a way to get her to safety.

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Paul was relentless in his driving and totally refused to say anything further. It took some time of total darkness speeding past before I remembered where I was and looked out, expecting to see more of Kathmandu.

"Where are we? There's nothing out there." Surprised at the darkness, I peered more closely at the absence of buildings and streetlights. Alarm brought me upright. Fear and suspense returned from the back of my numbed mind. I clenched my hands against my apron and demanded, "Where are we going?"

"To see the Sherpas, like I told you." A cold look of disbelief ricocheted to my face. His voice was iced mockery. "You don't think I'm abducting you?"

"I don't know what to think," I admitted feebly. I was at his mercy. Kay's image came to mind. I wouldn't have accepted his invitation and be here in the middle of nowhere with him if she hadn't given him a glowing endorsement.

Paul reached out and dwarfed my clenched hands with his out spread fingers. I recoiled but he didn't unwrap his hand.

"Don't give up on Nepal," he advised in a low growling tone. "You'll find enchantment. One only has to gaze upon the Mother Of The Universe to sense it all around."

I couldn't concentrate on mountains under his touch. I squirmed my hands out from under his grasp. He resolutely returned his hand to the steering wheel and continued his explanation in the practiced tone of a tour guide.

"Hindus call Mount Everest the Mother Of The World. Sherpas call it the Mother of the Universe. The peaks around guard the Mother. True believers sometimes fear to climb the Gods. The people believe Gods protect their lives and homes."

I had read all that and had nothing to say. Viewing mountains did something mystical to my psyche but looking was my bravest forte. I finally admitted, "I didn't come to Nepal to climb mountains."

"I understand. I'm not comfortable above fourteen thousand feet myself." He was apologetic in a belligerent sort of way. "I'm trekking to Namche Bazaar and the Sherpas I see tonight will be porters and yak handlers."

"What's it like--this trekking?" I thought a trek was a hike but the word sounded like an exotic sport requiring lessons and special equipment.

"We'll talk about that later. Look there," he gestured. My eyes followed the direction in which he pointed.

In a room with half walls and no roof, several hundred yards down a slope, I saw figures dancing and clapping. It took a few moments to comprehend the dark silhouette of a building with the open room on the roof. Women wore the type of dress I was wearing. Men were dressed in long sleeved tunics over shirts and pants, although some had their tunics draped off one shoulder, always belted at the waist.

"Those are Sherpas?" I asked, fascinated with the charming scene. I

remembered the word 'Sherpa' comes from the words shar meaning east and pa for people. Originally they had fled over the mountains from the east.

Paul let the car roll off the end of the rutted trail into the weeds. "We have to walk from here."

The isolated building was not visible until we came over the hill. A primitive drum beat accompanied a melodious chant that throbbed in the air. The compelling rhythm demanded my attention.

With little patience at my hesitation, Paul took my hand and led me down a well-traveled path with fields of vegetables faintly visible on both sides. The yellow circle from his flashlight bounced ahead of my feet but the walk was smooth and easy to follow.

The closer we came to the building, the less I could see of the dancers. A four-foot extension of the building's walls functioned as a railing and the crowd of Sherpas gradually submerged below it.

"The door's in back." Paul led me around behind the building to a doorway that had no door. It was a low opening, nearly as wide as it was tall, with a sill at least a foot high.

This hole in the wall didn't mesh with my concept of a door. Before I could think about that, my breath caught as the tough looking man I'd seen in the hotel stepped out. His dark crusty bare foot came to rest close beside mine. I pressed against Paul and eyed the straggly haired man with apprehension.

Paul's left eyebrow quirked in surprise at my cuddling movement, but he quickly brought my body closer to his, slipping his left arm protectively around my shoulders.

Inclining his head toward the short skinny man, he said, "Tina, meet my sirdar, Lohloh. He's the leader of my porters. Boss...foreman, I guess you'd call him."

I was mesmerized at the thought of shaking what looked like a grimy hand.

Paul's arm tightened on my shoulder, bringing me slightly in front of him, squeezing on my right elbow in such a way to force my arm forward, effectively offering my hand to the Sherpa.

There was nothing shy about Lohloh. At the expectation of the introduction, he took my hand in both of his.

No prejudice could have been more quickly removed when I let myself see his proud and dignified manner. The Sherpa's hands were soft, dry, and firmly caressing. The tone of his voice and his manner felt the same.

While gently shaking my hand, he spoke rapidly in softly modulated tones. His stringy black hair fell forward as he bowed his head in sync with emphasized syllables.

Intuitively, I knew the words were complementary.

A moment after Lohloh finished speaking and stepped back into the

shadows I realized he had spoken in English. His syllables ran together with inflections so strange I didn't recognize the words. He may as well have spoken Greek--or his native language.

I turned to Paul, wondering how I could make an intelligent response. Catching his glancing reminder of our closeness, I moved abruptly away. A twitch of his cheek mocked my effort and his hand relaxed on my shoulder.

"He says you are very beautiful and serving you will give him much pleasure." He nodded at Lohloh and added, "We are welcome to join the others."

I gathered my long skirt in one arm to step over the high threshold. "I prefer my jeans for this kind of climbing around."

"Look out for your head," Paul warned as he put his hand out and gently pushed my head forward.

"This is some doorway. I don't feel very welcome."

"But you are welcome here. The threshold keeps evil spirits out. Symbols on the frame prevent them from harming you. The door is small to keep heat in or the cold out, whichever way you look at it." He made no complaint as he doubled over and climbed through the door.

"I thought Buddhism was the Sherpa's chosen religion."

"Mostly," Paul answered, "People combine the comforting features. Sometimes it's difficult for outsiders to see."

Here was more for me to learn.

I squinted in the darkness. Bundles of sticks were piled behind a steep open stairs, which were barely visible in a dim filtered light. I made out vague objects like cans and boxes scattered around the room in the kind of array that resembled a landfill. I kept my head down, feeling closed-in by the low ceiling.

Paul moved toward the stairs, focussing the flashlight beam on the steps. His tall sinewy form bent like a bulky question mark, although he moved lightly and with the ease of one who had all the answers.

"Go on up," he motioned, impatiently, as if his directive was in question.

The stairs were steep, almost ladder-like, with treads spaced far apart, making an ascent a formidable affair even in fitted jeans. With the long skirt gathered in my arm and no railing to grip, the ascent looked difficult. I grabbed a nose-high tread and pulled myself up, step by step, in a sidesaddle sort of way to avoid hitting my knees and toppling over backwards.

I came into a room that was open from wall to wall with shelves along two sides laden with large bowls and pots of bright dented copper. On the far wall there were wide shelves resembling bunks only because of the blankets lying across them. A brazier glowed faintly on the floor across from an open window.

Nestled beside the next set of stairs stood a tall earthen vessel that looked like my great grandmother's butter churn. Bundles of dried onions and garlic hung from the rafters. The ceiling was high, I thought, until I noticed the

top of Paul's head almost brushed the cross beams. I frowned faintly as I remembered how he lifted me off the sidewalk to reach his mouth.

"This is the home of a climber who made it to the top of Everest. When he broke his leg and couldn't climb any more, he retired here."

"I thought believers didn't climb the Gods," I reminded him.

"Ah, Tiny, even after too much chang you remember little details."

"My name is Tina and I'll thank you to remember that." I bristled at him, wanting to strike something for emphasis. If he hadn't turned his back so blatantly, I might have used him for the target. I forgot to be upset over his calling me 'Tiny' and noticed with fresh irritation that he so easily ignored me. He motioned to another stairway that was just as steep as the one before.

Only a portion of the upper room had a ceiling. The open part was where the Sherpas were clapping and singing under the stars. They saw us when we reached the top of the stairs.

Smiling faces greeted us without missing a beat of the music or a word of the song. It was a lively chorus repeated over and over and I was fascinated. Their dancing kept in step with the clapping.

"Go ahead and join in if you like," Paul suggested.

That's exactly what I felt compelled to do.

The air was cool and a breeze made the atmosphere pleasant.

"Come, meet Sunny," Lohloh invited.

The youthful Sherpani that I had met in the restaurant came forward with a wide smile. She was not quite as tall as I, hardly more than a child. Her dress was the traditional black tunic like the one I wore. Her glistening black hair was parted in the middle and pulled tightly back into a thick braid that reached her waist. Her straight sleeved blouse was a pale green splashed with yellow blossoms. A small amber stone hung against her flat breast on a brilliant red cord.

She shyly put out her hand, pulling me into the group. I moved stiffly into the room, smiling into the faces of bright round cheeks and sparkling eyes that reflected the light from a Coleman kerosene lantern.

Library pictures did not do justice to these joyful friendly people. They drew me into their circle and made me feel at home.

"Sunny answer questions. Teach words you like," Lohloh added. He backed away a few steps, comfortable with her ability to take over my attention.

"Come dance, sing," Sunny urged.

At the pantomimed encouragement of nearby women, I clapped and got the swing of the chant. My purse neatly packaged under my apron left my hands free and a flush of appreciation for Paul's consideration swept my thoughts. That reminded me to search for his presence but he was nowhere in sight.

From the attitude of the singers I wondered if it was the chang that fueled their energy. My feet tapped in time to the rhythm of the drums almost

against my will.

Lohloh encouraged me to mimic the dance. He alternately raised one foot and hopped twice in place, then repeated with the other. His wide grin was an invitation to join that I did not resist.

I caught on quickly. The music required animation. I listened to the repeated words, noticing that different verses were sung to the same chorus. The rhythm and the tune were simple and repetitive. I kept time automatically with little effort. Sunny translated the words as a happy song with lovers blessed by the towering Gods.

The Sherpa men stayed within the area of dancing, except for the drummers and several older, stockier men sitting against the wall. Two of them with peppery hair bounced their chins to the beat, their sharp thin features solemn and expressionless, their eyes sparkling like sunlight dancing on rippling black water.

An ancient Sherpa sat with his chin resting on his chest, eyes alert. He wore a green and black shirt, the colors so washed out I had difficulty deciding where one color left off and the other began. Suddenly Paul appeared and talked to him. I felt them watching me but when I looked their way, they smiled and pretended to keep time to the music with nodding heads.

The song was raucous and the dancing too lively for me to concentrate on Paul. He moved constantly among the people. I settled my eyes on him as often as I could. He was my only link to my familiar world.

Women weaved in and out, alternately dancing and resting. It wasn't long before I stepped back to catch my breath. The night air cooled me quickly.

Against the wall I stood clapping lightly, scanning the room for Paul. His honey brown head was nowhere that I could see. As unobtrusively as I could, I peered through the doorway into the darkened room.

The old man with the black and green shirt came toward me with his hands outstretched, speaking rapidly. If he was speaking English words I couldn't understand them. He could tell by the blank look on my face that I didn't comprehend what he wanted me to know. He gestured first to my neck as if he would put something around it. Then to his own.

The old man put his hands to his neck in the same manner and I got the idea he meant necklace.

"You string," he said.

I backed away. The old wrinkled face held no menace, his eyes showed anxiety and concern and I couldn't figure out why. I wanted to protect my space against his assertive manner. He stepped back and I craned my neck to look for Sunny or Lohloh to translate but they weren't close by.

I puzzled over the old man as I took a more critical look at the costumes around me. I realized I was the only person without a string of stones around my neck.

At that moment the ancient Sherpa faced me again. This time between

his outstretched hands he held an oval turquoise hung on a black cord strung with coral beads. The bright blue stone was split diagonally by a slash like jagged lightning. The broken parts were held together in an ornate copper setting flanked by smaller black and gray striped stones suspended on a handmade cord threaded with silver strands.

He held the necklace for my observation and when I smiled at its bright blue beauty, he slipped the cord over my head and the heavy turquoise stone dropped in the hollow between my breasts.

I stepped back, stiffening with refusal.

"I don't want to buy..." I saw him as a vendor selling his trinkets.

"Not sale," he assured me. He exchanged Nepalese words with Lohloh and raised his open palms to fend off my refusal.

Lohloh translated, "You wear. Honor him. Very pretty."

I removed the necklace and tried to give it back. That translation left a lot to be desired. I couldn't see how wearing it would honor the old man unless he was making a proposal. As far as I was concerned that wasn't an honor to me. The practices concerning marriage in Nepal were beyond my knowledge. The last souvenir I wanted to take back to Minnesota was a husband.

The old man stepped back with his hands clasped in front of his faded checkered shirt. His eyes begged Lohloh to intercede for him.

Lohloh took the necklace and held it up by the cord. "He say pretty 'Merican wear dance. Gift you." He leaned forward to place it around my neck.

"I don't know what I'm getting into, Lohloh," I drew back out of his reach.

"O.K. Not worry," Lohloh assured me. "He not sell. Not worry."

Sunny came to Lohloh's rescue, "You dance good with necklace..."

"Sunny, is he proposing marriage?" I hoped she would understand my worry.

She smiled widely with comprehension. "Oh no, Burrah Sherpa," her hand swept toward the ancient one, "Burrah Sherpa want you have necklace for you. A gift. He say you need dress ornament. Make pretty lady dress more pretty." She took the necklace from Lohloh's hands and placed it around my neck.

I felt contrite. An apology seemed in order. "How do I tell him I misunderstood? I didn't mean to offend him, but I didn't know your customs. Please, Sunny, will you thank him for me?" I looked at the old man standing in the shadow and nodded a smile of thanks. A peaceful expression rested on his face. Two rapid blinks were his only noticeable reaction.

Sunny went to him and spoke intently with nods and gestures. While she talked, he watched me in speculation. His thin wrinkled features formed a tight smile when his remarks made her laugh. That left me feeling uncomfortable but Lohloh interrupted.

"Come. You dance." Lohloh pulled my arm and I jerked away. I was not ready to dance again.

I felt curious eyes on me. The turquoise weighed heavily on my neck. I wished Paul would appear.

What would I do if I was abandoned with these people? Paul insisted he was not abducting me, but what was I to think?

Abduct or abandon. One didn't sound any better than the other. I took a deep breath and looked at Lohloh.

"I'm too warm to dance," and I wasn't kidding. When he persisted, I fanned my face, hoping the pantomime would speak plainer than words.

"You cool," he grinned with a satisfied look and moved toward the dancers.

In a snake's eye, I wanted to object, I'm not cool. I'm hot and I'm sweaty and I'm scared and I wish I could do something about it. My eyes closed and I took a deep breath to quiet my fears.

I looked up at the stars to get my mind off the dread that threatened to engulf me. They were the same stars I knew at home. That at least was reassuring. It didn't help me understand Nepalese but somehow it was a comfort.

My gaze returned to the Sherpas, enjoying themselves as innocently as any young people ever did and I forced a smile. If I could just keep calm and relax, Paul would return from wherever he went and I could go back to my hotel.

I had to believe he hadn't left me. I didn't completely trust him before we got here. That mistrust didn't please me, but I couldn't help it. More than once I had the feeling of a strange undercurrent beneath the surface of his attentions.

Glancing around the room, I noticed the absence of the old men. Did they leave with Paul? A renewed sense of anxiety swept over me. To cover my discomfort I began to clap and sway to the music.

Fewer Sherpas were dancing but the singing was still going strong. I concentrated on the words.

The chorus came easily. I found Sunny and asked her to pronounce the words clearly for me. The words had been repeated so many times they were easy to follow. As my confidence grew, my voice became stronger, and before long, I was singing with the same strong emotional inflections as everyone else. I let myself be carried away in the melody. The effect of the chang had worn off.

"You've got a nice voice," Paul suddenly whispered, his breath tickling the hair close to my ear.

He glanced furtively around at the Sherpas.

"Shall I take you back to your hotel before you sing yourself hoarse?" His tone bordered on mockery.

"I'd appreciate it if you would," I remarked, with a searing glare.

His teflon surface went unscathed. He took me by the elbow and called

to Lohloh who materialized immediately at his side. With something that sounded like a farewell, Paul moved me toward the door, nodding his thanks to Sunny. She stopped me with a gentle hand.

"Burrah Sherpa thank you for offer when I tell you're sorry," she grinned.

"What are you saying?" I had made no offer and I worried about her translation.

"He say now have wife, but would bring many yak not broken stone if he want you wife."

Paul looked closely at Sunny and then at me. "What's going on?" he asked. His questioning gaze fell to my necklace. "Where did you get that?"

Sunny spilled her version of the story in rapid Nepalese. When he smiled at her words, I felt heat of embarrassment spreading up my neck and into my face. I wanted to untangle the misunderstanding in my own words but he wouldn't listen.

With a sudden sense of urgency he waved a general goodbye to the group and to me he commanded, "Wave and smile."

A genuine smile wouldn't have been so difficult if I hadn't been completely embarrassed about the circumstance of the gift.

He hurried me down the stairs, shining his flashlight on each step, with a hand ready to help me balance. Held tightly against my legs my tunic dragged behind me. I felt like a dustcloth brushing off the steps. Paul's arm around my shoulder continued to move me up the inclined path at a breathless speed, not slowing until we reached the car.

"Will you let me tel..."

"Shush."

He helped me into the passenger seat and hurried around to the driver's side. He settled his long frame behind the wheel. "Will you let me tell my side of the story?" I demanded while he backed the car out onto the road.

He paused to look straight at my face with his torso twisted as he turned backward with his arm braced on the back of my seat. He pushed out a deep, hard breath laced with impatience.

"One of the most revered ancient Sherpas gave you a turquoise necklace to adorn you like the others. You had misgivings and wanted to be certain of the customs. What more is there? "

"I thought he was a peddler at first. Then I remembered in some countries, men bought wives with trinkets. I didn't want to put my foot into an arrangement I wouldn't keep. He laughed at my foolish blunder."

"He was not laughing at you. He admired the way you stood up for yourself. He was flattered that marriage crossed your mind. You impressed him a great deal. His approval all but makes you an honorary Sherpani."

What could I say?

A dark shadowy landscape spun by as we headed toward faint lights of Kathmandu. I touched the turquoise, tracing the rough line of the crack in the

stone. The embarrassment I experienced took some time to subside. My thoughts were muddled with defiance and amazement.

Paul studied me a moment before he asked, "Are you still uncomfortable with it?"

I squirmed a little. The Sherpas were gentle dignified people and I felt more than a little pride in being accepted by them. Apprehension nibbled at the back of my thoughts. I couldn't imagine the full implications.

"No. What you said makes me feel better. I didn't know how to judge its value. I thought it might be expensive." The heavy stone gathered warmth in my cleavage. The string held it comfortably in place. I could only add, "It is a pretty gem."

"Then you'll wear it?" he asked. His tone was one of quiet pleading.

If I hadn't planned to wear it for the ancient Sherpa's sake, I would have worn it just to please the man beside me. For whatever reason I couldn't begin to explain.