

CHAPTER THREE

Run Over By Buffalo

The brilliant blue turquoise was a graceful oval cabochon, split almost in half vertically by a jagged crack that was rough and unpolished, indicating a recent break. The stone had not been broken before it was fastened in the copper setting. Gemstones didn't have to be cut or even polished to have value. Their real worth wasn't always measured in money.

Now that the turquoise was shattered it would be worthless as a gem, I thought, although sentimental value was impossible to judge. I studied the hand braided string that held the coral beads and striped stones flanking the turquoise. It had been skillfully fashioned of fine thread or hair I could not identify. All in all it was an impressive necklace and I was anxious to show it to Kay.

My ownership was one of pride but somehow the elegance of the necklace was lost against the dull blue of my jacket so I laid it in the drawer. My stone-washed denim suit wasn't new but my peach silk blouse was and the outfit gave me a prosperous image. I fussed with the attached ties until I got the soft bow just right under my chin. All thoughts of the stone slipped my mind.

When Kay arrived she wrapped her arms around me in a joyful reunion. She was as thin and attractive as ever, her long dark hair flowing loosely over her shoulders. Confronted by her height, I was stirred by a renewed tide of college memories, our appearances dubbed 'the long and the short of it' among the college crowd.

"You haven't changed," she commented, stepping back to look me over more carefully. "Or do I detect a few more muscles on those petite bones of yours?"

"Maybe just a few. I'd hate to think I have nothing to show for an outrageous health club fee." We grinned at each other and for a few silent moments simply enjoyed gazing at each other.

Our college days were filled with the intimacy that comes from packing ten months of living into a room only large enough for bunk beds, tiny closets, and separate desks. Two people who were not in tune with each other never made it as roommates for the whole year. Kay and I roomed together three years, although the last year was in a two bedroom flat with a private bath.

"Those three rooms were pure luxury, weren't they?" I recalled.

"The extra space probably saved our friendship during our dating days," Kay agreed. After a thoughtful pause, she stated, "You still haven't found your

heart's desire?"

"I stopped looking after my affair with George. He was almost perfect."

"You never told me why you split," Kay stated in a flat tone that meant she wouldn't press me now if I didn't want to talk about it. Strangely enough, I couldn't remember any pain.

"George broke it off. That hurt at the time. For as much as I knew about him, I thought I could spend my life with him. Then when we talked of marriage, he told me how to dress, to stop working out at the health club, and spend my leisure hours with his social set."

"What did he want, a showpiece?" Kay asked.

"He flattered me and built up my ego. He was well mannered and attentive when we were in public. I liked being well-dressed but I missed camping, roughing it with nothing but a tent and backpack.

"I would have bet on it. Did you insist on camping?"

"No, we never camped or hiked together. I missed it more than I realized. When the girl scouts needed a chaperon on their two week camporee, I took my annual vacation and went with them.

"When I returned--rested, energetic and enthusiastic--George told me I was never to do that again."

"Of course, if he really cared for you and your interests he would never have made such a demand," Kay quickly interjected.

"He walked out when I told him I intended to go every year. I thought he'd be back but he never talked to me again. I did a lot of camping and hiking after that." My thoughts were carried away when my gaze drifted to the open window.

A puff of breeze pushed at the lace curtain, bringing pleasant coolness across the room. Kay studied the white quilted bed coverings in silence, hesitating to interrupt. A large colorful photograph of the king of Nepal hung at the head of the narrow twin beds that nearly filled the tiny room. On the opposite wall hung a surrealist painting of a countryside scene. It was more British than Nepali but it brought me back to the present.

"I love my work but I realized how much I needed weekends in the wilderness. I'm not sorry I didn't give in."

"For what it's worth, I think you did the right thing." Kay sounded thoughtful. She clasped her hands and took a deep breath. "If we're going to see anything of Kathmandu we'd better get started."

"You did promise to show me around today," I reminded her.

"I don't want to portray an ugly American with these slacks if that offends these people."

Kay inspected me with thoughtful deliberation.

"An ugly American, you are not. Believe me. But maybe you do look too much like a tourist. You'll draw a lot of attention from peddlers selling trinkets and be a constant target of beggars."

"What do you suggest? Could I buy something more suitable?"

"Put on the Sherpani dress and we'll drape this material over your head. You'll blend into the crowd." Kay took some flowered material from her handbag.

"How did you know about that dress?" I was instantly suspicious.

"I sent the dress! Paul asked me to keep it a surprise."

"I don't understand." I shook my head in disbelief. "I wouldn't have had those frightening moments if I'd known you were in on it."

"What did Paul do to frighten you?" Kay asked, as she dropped onto the edge of the bed, incredibility creating an unsightly frown on her porcelain features.

"He left me there. I nearly panicked when I couldn't make myself understood."

"I didn't see anything ominous in his suggestion," she said. "He just wanted to give you a Sherpa experience and I saw no harm in that. I'll have to admit, I didn't understand why I should keep it secret. He asked me not to tell you and I don't know why I went along with his request other than I knew he could be trusted. I've always enjoyed his flair for the dramatic." She spread her hands and leaned back with her stiff arms on the bed behind her to support her.

I stared at her in disbelief. I combed my fingers through my hair, expelling a quick breath of exasperation. "Honestly, Kay, I was really scared, but you know what was worse? It was the moment when you sounded like you weren't glad to have me here." I slumped on the bed beside her.

Kay swung her arms around me and held me tight. "Oh, Tina, I'm so sorry. I really had an appointment I didn't feel it was wise to break. When Paul called with his request it seemed like the perfect answer." She leaned back to look into my face. "He gave you a spectacular introduction to Nepal. You do believe that, don't you?"

She waited for me to think that over, almost willing me to agree with her. I had to admit the evening turned out to be an exciting adventure, although threaded with some anxious moments I was glad to put out of my mind.

"It was something I only hoped could happen," I agreed.

"Get into the Sherpani tunic so we can get out and see Kathmandu."

"O.K. I hope you're right about my blending in. The beggars came on strong yesterday at the airport." I looked at Kay. "How will you blend in? You're so tall." As if Kay had to be reminded.

"I'm a respected American professor. People see me all the time in the company of foreign students so I'm not worth a second look."

"That'll be the day." I knew she was kidding. Her stately beauty rated second looks and always would. I took the Sherpani dress off the hook. "I felt like Abigail Adams in this last night. It was so bulky over my clothes."

"You'll be much too warm if you wear your suit under it in Kathmandu's

sunshine."

So I didn't. Leaving my new silk blouse in place, I stripped to my black, lacy underwear and slipped into the long, black tunic. Kay laid the pale flowered material over my head, crossed it under my chin, and softly draped the ends over my shoulders.

"None of the Sherpanis last night wore anything like this." They had bright ribbons woven into their hair but not one of them wore a scarf.

"You're right. Your short black hair is too fashionably cut. It'll mark you as a tourist anywhere." She stepped back to appraise my image. "We'll pick up a necklace for you at the market." She grinned and lifted her shoulders in an endearing shrug.

I slipped my turquoise necklace over my head. "Will this do?" I lifted up the scarf ends and put the string under my blouse collar.

"That's about as authentic as anything I've seen," she admitted, placing the stone in the palm of her hand. She probed my eyes with hers when she continued, "Where did you get it, if I can be so nosey?"

"A Sherpa named Burrah gave me the necklace at the dance," I explained, leaving out embarrassing details.

Kay stood back and put her hands on her hips, presenting a formidable picture. Her appraisal of me was done with a tipped head and narrowed eyes. Her actions startled me.

"I wonder how you rated that," she mused.

"I thought it was unusual but Paul assured me the ancient Sherpa was legitimate." Another thought crossed my mind. "Do you think it's valuable?" That question bothered me each time I looked at the stone.

"With that break, I doubt it, but when it was whole it might have been quite valuable. Just treasure it as a you would any gift," Kay encouraged. "Now let's get breakfast and see a bit of Kathmandu."

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A cart piled high with thatching grass rolled along the dirt trail. The lumbering ox that pulled the cart was urged ahead by the steady hand of an old man. Another old man kept his hand on the back of the cart as if to push it along. Occasionally he muttered words unintelligible beyond the rutted trail. Beneath their attitude of unhurried laboring, the old men warily observed the people they met and kept moving at a steady pace.

Wearied from long hours of travel over the familiar trail, they became more alert at the sight of a distant building. They pulled in behind the humble teahouse and unloaded the thatching grass and a young Sherpani.

She was swiftly moved to the upstairs living quarters where her bruises were attended. The old men rolled up in thin yak wool blankets and slept nearby.

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Dozens of monkeys skittered and chattered at us as we labored up the stairs to the Tibetan temple.

"The Temple Of The Monkeys is what I'll call this one." I groaned at the last of three hundred and forty-seven steps to the top of the hill.

"You're not the first one," Kay answered. "Temple Of The Monkeys is much easier to say than Temple of Swyambunath."

"Did you call this a chorten?" I was curious about the strange shaped monument set in the center of the flat temple area. The monument looked like an ungainly stack of child's learning blocks--a square, a half circle, and a triangular spire topped with a flaring symbol.

"Yes, the Tibet word is chorten. In Nepalese it is called a stupa," Kay explained. "It holds prayer books and religious relics."

"Then it's a shrine found in Buddhist villages," I affirmed. I'd read that it incorporates abstract Buddhist concepts. "Just how does it make them visible?"

"The square base is the earth, the dome represents water, and the triangular finial is both fire and thirteen steps to enlightenment. The uppermost symbol is the wind and sun."

Lines of prayer flags--little square white clothes with mantras--ran from the pinnacle of the chorten to the corners of the living quarters for the priests and their families. We walked around the monument in the clockwise direction in the manner of Buddhist believers.

I felt an oddly cheerful fatigue due to the elevation. The city itself was nearly a mile high, nestled in a lush valley below the towering Himalayas. It was an elevation I wasn't used to and, in the accompanying heat, it sapped my strength.

The exhilaration I felt when I reached the top of the pyramidal temple surprised me. That, too, was a result of the thinner air. Across from the steps the other side of the hill was more gently sloping. Tourists who approached the temple from that side walked leisurely around shops of locally-made pots, belts, bells, and handmade musical instruments.

Monkeys scurried everywhere, eating fruit, teasing each other, scrambling up and down, hanging by their tails, and making nuisances of themselves. They snatched food from each other and tourists but never bothered the priests. By their precocious behavior, I placed the monkeys somewhere in evolution above dogs, but very little less than humans. The temple was the domain of these monkeys and I was willing to let them have it.

"I'm ready for a cold drink and a lounge chair in a shady place." I measured the stone ledge as a convenient resting place for my weary body and moved toward it, warily displacing a monkey that backed off at my eye contact.

"Are temples, monasteries and shrines the only things Kathmandu has to offer?"

"The poor have no other comforts. They at least have hope of something eternal."

"Which is small comfort, I would think, if you're hungry or sick."

"You've got to see one more temple, Tina, The Temple Of The Living Goddess. That's near the palace. Then we'll cool it the rest of the day," she promised.

"Temple Of The Living Goddess," I repeated. The concept sounded incredible. I didn't believe it. "Do I get to see the Goddess, too?" I'll admit I put sarcasm into that question.

"If we don't get caught in a traffic snarl, we'll just be on time for her appearance."

"You're not kidding, are you?" The Living Goddess was mentioned in what I'd read about Nepal but the reality was so far-fetched I didn't file it with other facts. I looked at Kay to verify her sincerity.

Kay mistook my hesitation for distaste of the descending steps. Somehow they looked much steeper from the top. "C'mon. Going down is easy."

"Last one down's a rotten egg." I lifted the skirt of my long tunic to keep it from tangling around my ankles as we scurried to the base of the shrine. I felt carefree and silly as we flitted down the temple steps. Our outstretched arms warned the upcoming pilgrims to stand aside to avoid being swept down like bowling pins.

Kay drove the four miles to Kathmandu in record time. We walked the last few blocks to The Temple Of The Living Goddess. We walked through a narrow alley, winding between deteriorating brick buildings into an open plaza.

"Motor traffic isn't allowed in the market area."

Absence of roaring motors went unnoticed amid the noise of human voices calling out their wares. We stepped carefully around neatly piled yams, podded peas, ginger root, sweet potatoes, and tin bins of seeds and spices displayed on mats. The street merchants sat beside their wares, urging us to buy as we hurried along.

Peddlers wandered around them all, thrusting arms full of dangling copper bracelets, wire trinkets, flutes, and carvings in front of tourists faces, begging to demonstrate the wonders of their product. I, more than once, was glad I wore the homespun dress. Kay had been right about peddlers. They passed me to concentrate their sales skills on well-dressed tourists.

"Just where is this temple?" I saw no end of the market place.

"It's over here. Let's hurry."

Around another corner a wall loomed before us. Painted lion statues guarded the entrance steps. Carvings of laughing skulls decorated the lintels. We shouldered our way into a small courtyard with woodwork done in leaf and

scroll patterns on all four walls. Carved deities, peacocks, and doves adorned the balcony windows.

"The goddess will appear up there." Kay pointed to the window across from the entrance. Its dark interior contrasted vividly with the brilliant ocher of the brick wall.

I scanned the courtyard crammed with hushed people staring up at the window on the third floor of the facing wall. The star-struck audience might have been breathlessly awaiting the appearance of Elvis or Madonna.

"That's it exactly," Kay whispered. "Except that half of this audience is simply curious, just like you. They practice looking reverent so as not to offend the other half who are here to look upon the honored one. She's due to appear any minute."

A controlled tension crackled in the air. Women draped in soft mantles and peasants in homespun garments gazed with a reverence that was not contrived. I followed their gaze and the entire crowd held its breath.

Like a mirage, she flowed into view--The Living Goddess--a slender body sheathed in gold, silhouetted against black of the opening. Above a serene face was a golden headdress shaped like the flaring hood of a cobra. Her right hand rested on the window frame at head height and her left hand hovered at the sill before her.

The Goddess stood in repose, her round pale face without expression, receiving the reverent adulation from those below. Her eyes looked through every person, slowly and purposefully, as if all-seeing. She lingered only a few moments and the waiting crowd held its breath in silence.

Like a mirage, she disappeared. The square window was suddenly black and empty. It held the crowd's attention for long seconds before the withdrawal of the deity was acknowledged.

Everyone breathed again. I leaned against the high brick wall and wondered, "Does she ever get out? She looks so young."

"She leaves only for religious festivals in a flower covered chariot pulled by men. Her feet never touch the ground. The girl is chosen when she's about four years old and this is her home until she reaches puberty or otherwise loses blood from a wound."

I glanced often to the empty window as I watched the people silently lay their offerings on the ledge of the fountain. I knew nothing of the legends surrounding the goddess and had no clue as to what motivated their devotion.

The courtyard spilled the humanity out the opening as unhurriedly as a gentle brook spills water over the pebbles. Babbling began the instant the people passed through the opening as if they were suddenly dashed over boulders of reality.

Not everyone was so quick to leave. Several men were hanging back, malevolent figures, I thought. A swarthy man looked away when I met his gaze but his eyes darted back to me several times before he hunched his shoulders

and melted into the crowd. I reprimanded myself for automatically endowing every stringy haired man with sinister intentions.

Kay reached for my hand and led me back cross the courtyard. The high brick wall on the opposite side of the street was in better condition than any buildings we had passed in the market. It looked solid and modern. Traffic roared past with the same rumble and confusion of the highway from the airport.

"That surrounds the palace grounds." Kay offered.

"The King lives here? In the middle of the city?" I was awed and gawked at the top of the wall, expecting to see palace turrets and golden domes I attributed to Asian cities. All I could see were treetops, scant with foliage and hung with strange conical fruits. When I asked what kind of fruit they were, Kay laughed.

"They aren't fruit, they're fruit bats."

Over the distance I tried to judge just how big they were. The bats I knew were the size of small birds which would hardly be visible at that distance. These hanging bats were large compared to ravens flying around, so I figured them to be the size of chickens.

In my amused reverie I hadn't noticed the changing rumbling noise and I screamed when strong arms grabbed me.

"Just hang on, it's O.K." Like Sir Galahad, Paul swept me to safety off the sidewalk an instant before a thundering herd of animals swept by.

I whirled and faced Paul, shocked at his sudden appearance. I tried to pull away from his embrace.

A sharp hoof struck my ankle and I cringed against him, caught in his iron strong arms. I stared after the lumbering animals, partly in shock at my injury and partly in amazement at seeing cattle on a city thoroughfare.

The herd of scrawny water buffalo were restricted only by the stick wielded in a bony hand of a small thin-legged man in baggy pants and shirt that may have once been white. He glared at us for an instant, indignant at our presence on the sidewalk. He looked twice at me, as if I was particularly to blame for spooking his herd. His multi-colored cap, sewn in the manner of an army corporal's fatigue cap, fit tightly on his close-cut hair. He lifted it and scratched at his head while hurrying after his cattle.

Paul held me close with no more objection from me. He watched me warily, waiting for me to declare my injury. I was dazed at being so close to a stampede and felt thoroughly protected within strong arms. My throat was dry and my jaw hung open. My numb brain prompted me to close my mouth before I swallowed a serving of unhealthy dust.

Paul's hold didn't slacken as he looked at Kay and jerked his head toward the sea of bouncing horns.

"There ought to be better fare for dinner the next few days, don't you think, Kay?" He released me somewhat reluctantly, I thought, when I pushed

away from him to limp out on the sidewalk. The pain in my ankle made me flinch and his steadying hand returned to my hip.

"Are you implying that people eat water buffalo?" I was offended by the thought of eating the ragged bony animals. Somehow a steak off their lean flanks didn't have the same appeal as a sirloin tip off a sleek Hereford steer.

"That's right, at least the ones who won't kill their own meat eat buffalo, goat, rabbit or whatever the butcher or cooks offer." Paul dropped back a step and turned his body to permit me a lingering view of the animals.

My heart was still racing from the close brush with disaster. I pulled up my skirt and bent over to see what hurt. A black gash marked the place where I had been kicked but blood wasn't gushing out so I dropped my skirt.

"Let me have a look at that," Paul insisted, hunching down beside me. He put both hands on the back of my leg, pulling me slightly off balance. I steadied myself with my hand on his shoulder.

"My car is around the corner," Kay said, "Let's get her to my place and clean that up."

"Harry's is just down the street," he said. His urgency seemed unnecessary although my skin and anklebone stung immensely.

"Is that where you were going?" Kay asked. "We were heading to my place for lunch and a cool drink. You're invited." She moved toward the intersection.

"I have to go to the outfitters." Paul stood up and put his arm around my waist. His expression allowed no rebuttal. I tried to straighten away from him to walk by myself but he didn't let me go. I was being pulled along, limping as much from being crushed against his side as from my sore ankle. I felt dragged along like so much baggage.

Kay gracefully matched his stride and sent him a charged look. "Did you find an opening for us on a trek?"

That moved by attention from the excitement of Paul's nearness to the thrill of a new adventure with no change in my rapid heartbeat. I hadn't mentioned a trek to Kay. Had she planned one as part of her sightseeing agenda?

"Yes, Harry has permits for a trek beginning the day after tomorrow. Will that fit into your plans?" He looked to Kay with his question when I thought he should be asking me.

"Are you coming, too?" I asked. I looked at Kay with a brightened face, beaming with the prospect of spending time with her on the mountain trails. Dimples emerged as my smile spread to a grin at Kay's affirmative nod.

"Yes, you and Kay will join the trek with Harry and me," Paul confirmed, looking into my face. His eyes lingered on my grin, an odd look of anguish flitting across his face. His features were formidable, handsome in a strong substantial way. The honey brown hair was so close to my face I could see split ends on the strand curling against his eyebrow.

His gaze dropped and he stiffened when he saw my study of his face. I shifted my weight and flinched with each punishing step.

"You'll be fine," he assured me coldly. "We'll clean that up at Harry's." He must have thought I was struggling against his support and he loosened his hold. He dropped his arm from my waist, letting me walk by myself. I got the feeling he regretted showing too much concern over my injury. His changing moods irritated me. His wariness would recede and suddenly return as it did now.

"You've got to explain trekking," I insisted, recognizing his desire for a change of subject.

"If you promise not to laugh, I'll explain trekking." Paul impudently shrugged his shoulders. The distance between us brought a brightness to his features. Smile lines deepened the corners of his eyes, promising a mirthful exchange.

"I'll make no such promises. If it's silly enough to laugh about, I don't want to hear it." I caught his murky gray eyes with a darting glance. Holding his gaze too long was risky considering how my pulse reacted.

"You won't find it silly," Kay frowned, "and after a few hours of the experience, you might not want to laugh either, but Paul has a funny way of describing it."

"I want to know about trekking," I insisted.

He placed his hand on the small of my back and urged me to follow Kay. "We'll get your ankle fixed up first," he murmured, alarmingly close. "When you see the equipment and the serious travelers, you'll get a better picture." The imprint of his hand was like a brand on my awareness. I was both thrilled and offended by his attitude, which left me hesitant with confusion.

Kay led us through a narrow winding passageway between rough walls where the exposed mortar had long since fallen from between the bricks.

"It's down this way." Paul's arm moved again on my back as he shifted to the edge of the sidewalk to shield me, charmingly, I thought, from the taxis that buzzed threateningly close to the curb.

In moments, we turned onto a street where buildings were separated from the sidewalk by tall shrubs shrouded in cascades of trumpet-shaped blossoms. The shop doors opened on the sidewalks, using all the space for their wares.

Paul entered the cluttered shop with a wave at the man waiting on a German-speaking couple in safari tan shorts and shirts.

"Be with you in a minute," Harry nodded with a raised eye brow at his customers.

"We need to borrow your back room right now, Harry," Paul said. "Tina was kicked by a water buffalo."

That got everyone's attention. I hadn't noticed Paul's use of my name, as if Harry should know who I was. The couple paused to watch Harry open the

door and push me past the disarray of dented, grimy equipment.

"Can I help?" Kay asked.

"No," Paul shot back over his shoulder. "Look over the stuff for the trek."

The outfitter's shop was cluttered with hiking supplies of every description. The bulky sleeping bags, tents and jackets hung high on the walls above a total disarray of bottles, cans, stoves, flashlights and lanterns on overflowing shelves. The floor was piled with cans and water jugs. Among them were assorted spikes, boots, and poles.

"That stuff looks like it's been used," I mused, quietly trying to distract my thoughts from the pain in my ankle.

Paul's expression was closed and impersonal as he grasped me at the waist and placed me like a sack of grain on the rough-hewn table.

Harry produced a first aid kit and lit a gas burner under a kettle filled with water. Paul folded the hem of my tunic on my knees and squatted at my feet. He opened a bottle of alcohol and saturated a ball of cotton. I gasped at the first sting of the cold disinfectant placed against the wound.

Paul accepted my response with a knowing flash of his steel gray eyes. He calmly sponged at the dirt on my ankle until a rough line of broken skin appeared. Leaning over to watch what he was doing brought me precariously close to his honey brown head. I had nothing to brace myself against so I sat up and looked at the disarray in Harry's back room.

Paul appeared to be reminded of my statement about Harry's used merchandise.

"The trekking equipment has been used, I assure you, probably several times. Some of these supplies were abandoned at the base of Everest," Paul explained, continuing to clean my wound. "They were brought back and sold by porters. Some were brought back by disillusioned trekkers and sold for a ticket home."

By now the water was hot and Paul poured some into a pan to which he added a vile smelling disinfectant. He dropped a large square of gauze into it and set it down on the floor. Steam came off the mixture and spread the acrid smell.

I worried about being scalded but I hadn't reckoned with Paul's gentle side. He searched the first aid kit for salve and bandages. When he was satisfied that his supplies were properly laid out, he tested the temperature of the water.

"This is going to be hot but it won't burn your skin." With that caution, he took the wet gauze and mopped the dirt off my ankle. He cast the dirty gauze aside and with a clean one, mopped the gash and the entire area around it a second time.

I gritted my teeth against the sting of the disinfectant that he seemed to rub into the torn skin with excessive vigor. I thought he was being entirely too fussy. I could have cleaned it in half the time.

It was time to remind myself to be grateful for his help. I'd never been struck by cattle hooves before and I didn't know it would hurt so much. If he hadn't pulled me away as far as he did, I would have been trampled. No doubt that would have hurt a whole lot more.

He squatted directly in front of me, intent on doing the right thing. I took a deep breath and sat back to contemplate his honey brown hair. I couldn't think of any other color to describe the deep flowing waves that held their own translucent light.

My foot hung straight down, forcing me to lean forward to watch his progress. When I saw the clean wound, I gasped in disbelief at its extent and strained to get a closer look. The outside of my ankle seeped blood from a slash of ruptured skin across the bone streaking upward for several inches.

"It's not as bad as it looks," he assured me. He bandaged it expertly and lifted me off the table. "If you haven't had a recent tetanus shot, you'd better get one now."

My travel agent had included more than one shot for my health's sake before I packed for Nepal so I wasn't worried on that score. I put my weight carefully on both feet to test the effect of Paul's treatment. The wound still stung from the medication but my leg felt strong.

Unanswered questions about trekking kept nibbling at my mind. Harry had sent his German speaking customers off with their purchases and was helping Kay with her selections.

I sat down on a ten-gallon water can and folded my arms, looking resolutely from Kay to Paul. "Tell me about this trekking business. If you think I'm going to carry all this stuff..." My eyes examined the surrounding supplies.

Paul hunkered down beside me. "You carry what you like. Porters will carry the rest."

"Do we need all this for a trek?" I asked. The variety of equipment appeared endless.

"The goods traded here represents a major part in the economy of Nepal. This is brought in by trekkers, who are tourists, like you. The trekkers pay a high fee for the privilege of climbing the Himalayan peaks, whether they succeed or not. In the process they hire Nepali people and the wages improve the standard of living and bring out new desires of the people. They want better education and living conditions." Paul's eyes roved over Harry's inventory.

I marveled at the warm and gentle smile that softened Paul's chiseled features and darkened the misty gray of his eyes. His concern for the people of Nepal was touching.

"That's a heavy introduction to the humorous explanation you promised," I said.

"It's the seriousness of the casual tourist that makes it funny," he

agreed, a closed smile tightening his mouth.

With a set of his shoulders expressing his resignation, he began, "Fully grown adults, whose intelligence level is in question, will gather and sort the supplies they absolutely need for the next two weeks. They'll stuff them into a sturdy bundle already outfitted with harness straps. They'll wriggle their arms into the straps, balancing the pack against their shoulder blades. They'll adjust the straps to cut across their shoulders effectively securing the bottom of the pack above the kidneys."

"I know the feeling," I interrupted. "It's the first step in any long range hiking." So far I wasn't impressed, and I wasn't laughing.

"You're not impressed." He said flatly. "Kay, I'm crushed. Tiny's not impressed." He grimaced in fake pain and disappointment and stood up with a shrug. These two friends flanking me broke into a laugh. I found it impossible to get angry at Paul's use of the nickname I'd always hated.

With eyes rolling upward, I shook my head and decided to laugh with them.

At that moment the grimy buffalo herder appeared in the doorway, his eyes peering into the room. His eyes clung to my face and dropped to the turquoise on my breast. He stared in a moment of confusion then backed away.

The laughter died in our throats. Paul darted out the door as the fleeting figure bolted down the street.