

CHAPTER SIX

A Roll In The Bushes

Paul supervised the final touches on my costume as the wealthy Tickpay that I was presumed to resemble. He stood back to view my entire costume. His gaze lingered critically but impersonally over every inch of my figure until his eyes reached my lips. His features softened and a distinct longing stole into his eyes darkening them to a velvet gray. The moment he caught me watching he lowered his lids.

"There, that does it," he said. Kay nodded her approval.

I was wearing a brimless hat of dark woven wool styled like a square bowl, which had a thick braid attached and hung down my back. The hair texture wasn't quite like mine but the color was close enough. I set the hat toward the back of my head and let spears of my own hair fall naturally out in front of my ears. I fastened the hat to my hair and, although the hat helped to warm me, I was fully aware that Paul's nearness had me warming with a sexual awareness I hadn't felt in a long time. He waved his hand toward the door and stepped outside.

We were off to the bazaar. Paul stayed close to my side. I found it difficult to believe I was so attracted by a man I had known for a few short days, no matter how much of hunk he was. He led me quietly through the narrow streets, deferring to me as one would to a royal personage. He had me feeling strangely like an aristocrat in this foreign outfit and I found it difficult to concentrate on the exotic village in which I found myself.

Opposite the horse-shoe shape of the village terraces the ochre-red walls of the Buddhist shrine blazed forth in the first sun rays. Isolated and lonely in this irreverent crossroad of commerce, it did not receive the same respect given centers of Buddhism in other Sherpa villages. The morning sun had not yet touched the terraced houses and my breath puffed out in wispy white swirls in the crisp air.

I had an outworldly sense of being someone else. To masquerade as a foreigner was at once exciting and foreboding. I began to act like someone else, not simply dressed like a Sherpani as I had when dancing with Sherpas in Kathmandu. I shivered more from anticipation than from the cold but the chill in the air, I thought, only harbored the winter I expected on a December day.

"Will there be snow?" I asked, feeling the need for conversation to bring me back into the real world.

The cloudless sky indicated otherwise and Paul said so. He seemed preoccupied with more pressing thoughts as he greeted people passing by.

We made our way to a street overlooking the terraced area of the marketplace where the trail from Jorsale enters the outskirts of the village. A large bare rock stood out, its top too rounded and inaccessible for a trading site, but an excellent outlook from which people lazily viewed the market itself or those arriving on the trail. My gaze followed Paul's to the trail on which we climbed into Namche the night before.

I could hardly believe the precipitous appearance of the worn trail. Although I recalled its width and the thick growth of trees and bushes that spread out broadly on each side, I had not remembered how steep it was. A porter with a fully loaded basket was approaching the market. Behind him, not fifty feet away, only the torso of the next porter was visible, the hill was that steep. Behind him I could only see a head coming toward us. "Are you telling me that's the trail we came on?" I asked. My lungs and legs ached from the climb, I didn't deny that. In the cool clear air with a peaceful night's sleep my body had recovered and I had completely forgotten my fatigue.

"Didn't I tell you? You did good." Paul said, huskily.

I glanced at him, surprised by the odd note in his voice, but his quiet gray eyes gave nothing away. I jerked my wayward mind back to look at the market.

In the early morning light I got an excellent overview. Some traders already waited for trading to begin, looking cold, huddling in groups for warmth. Some had tiny fires.

"What's in those baskets?" I asked, genuinely curious about the trading practices in this world famous market.

"Rice, maize, wheat and other grains," Paul informed me as he stood socially acceptably apart from me, this reknown personage from the valley.

"They're sold by volume, measured with a brass container," he continued, as he impersonally took my elbow and turned to point to other vendors. "Onions and butter are weighed by a simple balance. Other vegetables are sold in bundles or by the piece, and so are eggs and fruit."

How was it possible to be so acutely aware of a man's fingers through layers of clothing? Yet I could feel every one of Paul's as if it touched my bare flesh. I was over reacting, I realized. He was simply trying to put across to any interested onlookers that I was a trader's wife absorbing the layout of the marketplace and as a reputed guide, merely indicating points of interest to a visitor. I did not think a guide should be so familiar with the wife of a famous man and I pulled away, stiffly.

The traders formed two orderly lines leaving an irregular corridor between them for the buyers. Commodities were spread on mats beside the traders, much like I'd seen in Kathmandu. Meat, too, lay openly on mats, with the clean butchered quarters of goat distinguished from water buffalo by size alone.

We made our way gradually down to the level of the traders. Crowds

formed around the products. Buyers examined the vegetables with discerning eyes, pinching them for freshness the way I always did. Sherpanis plunged their hands into sacks letting the grain run through their fingers to reveal its quality. Dirt and unwanted seeds were easily detected.

I had only a short time to enjoy the sparsely crowded excitement before being plunged into the jostling buyers who came to get their supplies. Trading took on a brisk atmosphere and it soon became impossible for me to see what was going on.

"Where are the yarns and materials?" I wanted to know. My tunic was made from heavy cloth, soft and tightly woven, like nothing I was familiar with. I saw no hand work in the market.

Paul looked around anxiously. He didn't appear pleased to have me jostled in the hustling crowd. He put a guiding hand on my elbow.

"We'll go see Dawa Sherpa. He has yarns, I think." He pulled me through the crowded street and up ever-present steep stone steps where traffic consisted of a few Caucasian trekkers browsing at the open tables of jewelry and knickknacks along the walls.

On the narrow street with no one else nearby, Paul took Kay's arm and stopped in front of me. "I have an idea," he said, looking from me to Kay with mysterious speculation, "Let's see if Dawa is fooled by Tina's appearance."

His indomitably gray eyes held my gaze. I prickled with excitement, he looked so dramatic.

"We'll enter the shop first so Dawa doesn't see you before we greet him." Paul's eyes roamed over me with affection, caused only, I suspected, by his satisfaction with the successful costume.

Nevertheless my wayward body warmed under his observation. I bit my lip, shyly noticing the tiny lines at the corners of his eyes, the texture of his skin, the way his honey brown hair curled over his forehead. God, I really felt like an alien. What was happening to me, anyway?

"Come, Tickpay," he murmured and moved his long lean body up the steep walk with the ease of a stalking leopard. Why I made that comparison, I don't know, because a predator doesn't precede its prey, it follows it.

Kay didn't immediately fall in behind him. She had a funny tight little smile on her face and I quirked an eyebrow waiting for an explanation.

"He likes you, Tina," she said, "but sometimes he acts like he's playing some kind of game."

Sometimes I thought so, too, but his game with my identity seemed harmless. The game with my heart was something else. I felt exquisitely warm from his approval, exciting me into feeling more feminine and confident.

Kay's remark about him liking me made me push away concerns I would otherwise have had. Could that possibly be true? I bent to follow Kay up the steps.

Paul stopped before turning on the street at the next terrace, motioning

that Dawa Sherpa's shop was just ahead. He entered the shop greeting Dawa with the gusto of a long lost friend. Kay walked in ahead of me and then stepped aside to give Dawa a sudden view of my smiling face.

Dawa Sherpa was pleased to meet Paul in his shop. He expected Paul to drop in on his frequent treks so this was not a complete surprise. But when he saw me--correct that--when he saw the wealthy visitor from Kathmandu, he came forward and reached for my hand, completely at a loss for words. Although he must have been a special friend of the rich woman, he did not expect to see her in his shop.

His black eyes darted from my face to my necklace and back to my face. His eyes narrowed as he paused a moment to search my features. He held my hand firmly as if to verify his thoughts before he turned to Paul.

"What's going on here?" he demanded. I had misled him for only a minute. Perhaps my size and coloring had confused him but it was the costume that deceived him. The necklace appeared to be the biggest factor in the whole deception.

Paul began to explain to Dawa in English but the Sherpa's understanding was better in his own language so animated words soon flowed that I didn't understand. I shrugged and stood back to watch the expressions during the exchange between the long-time friends.

Kay diverted my attention to the hanks of yak and goat yarn hanging above the counter at the side of the shop. We examined the texture and discovered the many shades of black and white were natural variations in the wool.

My attention was drawn to the colorful items on the wall and I found myself staring at a tanka--a painted cloth scroll--with leopards and bears on mountain peaks, cattle and goats in alpine meadows, and a village with terraced fields. The most vivid colors were used in this painstaking artistry of Buddhist monks. I became so engrossed in the exquisite details I lost track of time. I decided to buy it and turned to Kay for help on the price.

She was deep in the discussion with Paul and Dawa and within their circle stood the Burrah Sherpa. I wanted to greet him and moved to do so. He gave me a split second glance of recognition before turning back to Paul, listening for an uninterrupted minute. I hesitated to intrude and patiently waited. I was expecting too much from a casual acquaintance. Just because he showed some previous attention didn't mean he would welcome me into his immediate circle.

Paul's gestures indicated he was giving directions. If it was about our route, I couldn't tell but the Sherpa nodded agreement with what he said. The old man gave me one final glance before he left the shop, responding with a nod to my halfhearted wave.

He didn't show the same concern for my appearance here as he had at the Sherpa gathering. I was properly adorned so why should I be disturbed?

Annoyance started to sweep over me and I cast it off. Still, I was curious if he came to Namche with goods to sell or buy.

I wondered if the buffalo herder would be next to appear. The thought occurred in jest but brought a scowl to my face and sobered me considerably.

Paul and Dawa approached me as if for the first time.

"Forgive my rudeness," Dawa implored, "Your appearance startled me. I am pleased to meet you, Tina Burrows." He took my hand and bowed slightly before he continued, "I am Dawa Sherpa and our mutual friend thinks you may wish to see my home."

Dawa jerked his head toward Paul and the question about the price of the painting was forgotten. I assumed the lengthy discussion had been about my visit with no ominous overtones at all.

Dawa led us through the rear door of the room and raised his open palm to indicate we should proceed without him. He returned to tend the shop.

"Dawa earned a healthy fortune along with a good reputation climbing the peaks," Paul said.

"His wife convinced him to give up the risky work. Too many climbers are injured or die in tempting the gods," Kay added.

We faced another Sherpa stairway. It was cleaner than the stairs I climbed in Kathmandu but just as steep. Paul introduced me to Dawa's wife, Pem Pem, who showed great pride in her home.

The room was lined with shelves of great copper pots and other metal vessels, some decidedly Chinese and some English. Paul brought my attention to the ever present stack of wood and a full vessel of water symbolizing luck to the Sherpas.

In the corner by the stove the ceiling was hung with bundles of garlic. She pointed with pride to the enclosed metal firebox with a pipe up through the roof.

"I do not have to breathe smoke when I prepare food," Pem Pem announced proudly in perfect English.

The room set aside for the Buddhist shrine was most impressive. One wall was lined with cabinets decorated in riotous colors and floral designs. Many of the cabinet doors had glass fronts to protect, yet show off, colorful statues of deities to be appeased by the family.

Pem Pem made Yak tea, a salt and butter tea not offered in hotels or tea houses. I watched her prepare the tea in a vessel not unlike the early American butter churn with a plunger attached to a long handle.

"Yak milk and salt cuts the acid," Paul said, as we sipped the tea from small china cups.

The tea had a rich flavor that appealed to me. I could see that Paul liked it, too. That made me wonder about his life and the question slipped out, "How long have you lived in Nepal?"

"Most of my life," he answered. He didn't elaborate until much later the

specifics of his father's transfer from India as a good-will ambassador.

When we returned to the room behind the shop a wizened man was sitting on the bench with his hands folded in his lap and his feet crossed in a relaxed manner. He nodded to us but when I greeted him in English he merely blinked and nodded more deeply than before.

"He speaks only Tibetan," Paul explained.

"He has more of an oriental appearance than the Sherpas," I remarked. Except for his woolen cap and shirt, his clothes were made entirely of animal skins with the hair turned inside. His boot soles looked to be made of the same skins and the inserted woven woollen leggings came to his knees.

"He's Tibetan. He just came over the pass today," Paul explained and turning to the seated man he asked what he had brought over from Tibet.

The Tibetan grinned at being addressed in his own tongue. Just a few stones he told Paul, nothing much. He came to trade for oranges for his daughter whose child was due in late spring.

This man had walked through an icy mountain pass over four miles high in animal skins with no added oxygen. I was amazed although this kind of travel was well known. I wondered how many other unusual buyers came to the marketplace.

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Burrah Sherpa hurried the Sherpani and her companions out of Namche as soon as he explained the plans. He said a storm was coming so they must move quickly.

More importantly, the turquoise necklace was attracting so much attention that they would be able to move safely for several days and be completely out of danger.

They arrived in the lower altitudes before the storm. Then the Sherpas disappeared.

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At our tent by the Inn I slipped my jeans under my tunic and put on my hiking shoes. I started to pull the pins out of my hat so I could remove the tunic when I remembered the scroll painting at Dawa's shop.

"I want to buy that tanka before I forget." I was too impatient to wait for Kay. I thought I could find the shop by myself.

"You've got enough Nepali rupees to buy the painting," she assured me.

I set out feeling rather smug at going off by myself.

Sherpas and tourists strolled on the street and I moved in and out among them, smiling as I trudged up the stone steps. Sherpanis stood in open doorways beside tables of trinkets, smiling back at me. The men sat inside,

behind them, presumably to help if needed.

I pulled back against the wall when a couple of rowdy men swayed out of a shop, their voices and footsteps indicating chang had been the major part of their recent lunch.

In a flash I was dragged by the arm into a dark doorway. A tight sticky rag popped into my mouth when I opened up to yell. I struggled to free my mouth and my arms were pulled behind me. I flexed my fingers and held my wrists rigid to fight my captors as they tied my hands together.

My eyes didn't adjust to the dark interior of the livestock byre quickly enough to see my attackers. I could tell they were short men with hard stringy muscles when they roughly pushed me back into the darkest corner of the livestock byre. As my eyes became accustomed to the dim light, I saw the buffalo herder.

I was horrified. Again I tried to scream.

Only muffled noises came through the wool tied against my mouth. I stiffened when a stockier man came and stared at the turquoise stone on my necklace. A heavy cloth fell around my head. I slumped into the hay.

The men began to talk rapidly in sounds that made no sense to me. I strained to catch the intent from their tone.

I was shocked anew when they began to speak English.

"Get plans straight. Husband wait in village in valley."

"Good. We move tonight."

"You move now," the gruff voice ordered. "Soak shawl in chang and wrap face and neck. Walk through bazaar like drunk."

"She strong. What if fight?"

"Hit head. Careful, not injure. Big man not pay for dead."

I heard liquid splashing and I felt them coming nearer.

I was too stunned to struggle when they hung the stinking shawl over my head and around my neck. They pulled me roughly to my feet. They were going to take me away! What could I do?

A thin blanket was flung around my shoulders to hide my tied hands. I was grasped by my upper arms and pushed forward. The foreign word they barked at me must have meant 'get moving' because when I did they moved with me and spoke no more.

They started a noisy drinking song when my feet touched the stone walk and I became part of a drunken trio heading home from a successful day at Namche Bazaar.

Behind my back, I flexed my hands and pulled at my binds. I found it impossible to walk normally as bound as I was. With my arms restricted and my eyes covered, my steps faltered. I stumbled many times along the path. I was too stunned to worry about my footing and too scared of a hit on the head to fight.

Would they actually hit me in the crowded market? That would draw too

much attention, wouldn't it? How could I get away? But what good would it do to break loose when I couldn't speak? Even if I could speak what good would it do if no one could understand me?

My heart beat frantically while my mind raced at the same speed in search of a solution.

My feet dragged but that fit their plan. That added to my drunken appearance so my companions had to help me along. When I moved my head and grunted they grunted back and laughed loudly. How long this could go on?

I was so frightened it was difficult to think. My fear had to be conquered. I struggled fiercely to think rationally.

It took minutes to become attuned to my surroundings. I listened as intently as I could, hoping for an inspiration to save myself.

My captors were putting on a realistic drunken show by the sounds of joining men as we staggered along. I felt the bumping of shoulders and the thumping of hands on the backs of my forced companions. A well-wisher struck my back and I staggered to my knees but I found my balance quickly. Hard hands grabbed my arm and hauled me to my feet.

Underfoot I could feel the path slanting downward. The path was descending steeply and the sounds of the haggling crowd were behind us. To my left would be the steep hillside and on my right would be a slanting brush covered area.

Although I couldn't see, I was sure we were on the path leading down toward Jorsale that Paul had pointed out earlier when we stood above the market.

That realization held little meaning for me. I was a captive and I was being taken out of Namche to a big man who was paying well for my capture.

Bleating goats came toward me. The bleating came from an area that spread from the steep hillside on my left to a more level area to my right where I could hear the leaping animals crashing the brush almost beside me.

Yelling herdsmen heralded the flock of goats that suddenly milled on the path around me. Clutching hands left my elbows. Warm stinking animals surrounded me and I braced myself to keep from being pushed backwards. I waded a few steps against the current of bleating bodies and suddenly knew what I had to do.

I lurched sideways, curling my chin into my chest, bringing my shoulders up close to my ears. I squeezed my eyes tightly shut and curled my body into the tightest ball I could within my bonds. With all my strength I threw myself blindly toward what I thought was a bushy area below the stony path.

The forward motion of my weight was drawn to the downward slope and my body became a missile. Blood thundered through my veins as I rolled among the bouncing goats and grasping bushes. Sharp hooves cut my

careening body but I didn't feel the pain.

Instead, I felt a heady triumph as I put distance between me and my captors. Their frightened curses mingled with the sounds of bleating goats and angry herdsman. The noise dimmed as I rolled away.

My head bumped sharp rocks with every roll. My shoulders were stabbed by sticks and branches. My arms ached from their awkward position and the intense grip with which I clenched my fists. My face would have been slashed if not for the heavy material put on to hide my gagged mouth.

I straightened out to stop my rolling and thumped my ankle against a thorny bush. Pain flashed up my leg. I gritted my teeth and sucked in a breath of sour chang. If my mouth hadn't been stuffed with wool I would have thrown up. It took a few minutes of deep breathing to stop the gagging notion as it was.

How foolish I had been. I could have killed myself. I lay panting in fear of what might have been. What appeared unwise to me now had been the only possible action I could take a moment ago and it worked because I was free. Or was I really free?

I felt free for a moment. My entire body trembled from the tumble and although the tumbling stopped, my trembling did not. When my captors found me, I could expect to get one "no injure" hit on the back of my head. In my blindness I couldn't tell what would happen next.

I lay panting in anticipation of the worst to come. My captors weren't grabbing at me. I couldn't hear them talking or moving around. All voices were quite distant. Even the bleating of the goats had stopped. I gingerly moved my feet to examine the terrain around me. All I could tell with my booted foot was that the hillside had a respectable slope that continued on. There was no edge nearby. I was relieved not to be close to a precipitous drop into the river gorge.

Noises subsided above me. My ear was close to the ground and I heard no hard footsteps. I decided to lay still until I was discovered. Perhaps if my captors thought me unconscious, they would treat me with care. The big man, I reminded myself, would not pay for dead.

I wiggled my hands but with the tension of my clenched fists the ties held my wrists tightly together. The irony of my predicament struck me. Nepal represented adventure but I didn't expect this. Paul told me I could expect enchantment in Nepal but this did not meet my definition of the word.

I remembered the game of playing Sherpa in Kathmandu. It turned out all right in the end.

Or did it? It was at the Sherpa dance that I received the necklace. Paul said the gift practically made me a Sherpa. The necklace appeared to be a key to danger. The woman I impersonated should be the one in trouble. That made little difference to my captors as long as they thought I was that woman.

That was Paul's fault. At Paul's urging I dressed like a Sherpa. At Paul's

urging I kept the necklace. At Paul's urging I wore the necklace today. He assured me this masquerade was harmless.

Each time I suspected him of devious action he set my fears to rest with his male charm, the likes of which I had not felt victim to before. Even when I detected an underlying plot being played out between Paul and others, I was quick to cast it off as my tourist paranoia because he embodied powerfully compelling male characteristics--and attributes I completely admired.

At my arrival in Kathmandu he appeared to be helpful. I trusted him and now I realized that trust had been misplaced. I reminded myself that I ignored all the warning signs. The obvious could no longer be disregarded. He deliberately set me up for this kidnapping and I didn't have a clue as to his reasons. I tried to shake the numb fear out of my head.

Fault finding wasn't going to get me out of this mess. I slowly lifted my head and tried to work the shroud off so I could look around. With my eyes uncovered I hoped to find a way out of my dilemma. I managed to get up on my trembling knees and push against the ground with my forehead to loosen one layer of material.

I weakened quickly in my exhausted state. I lay back and valiantly struggled with an athlete's discipline to let my body relax. After several deep breaths I realized my wrists felt less restricted. Had my rolling and struggling loosened the ties? I relaxed as much as my trembling body would allow and concentrated on my wrists.

My body was tense and I had little patience. I was no contortionist so I couldn't bring my tied hands under my bottom and my feet to work with the bindings from the front.

I forced myself to relax my hands and managed to slip one wrist past the other. I felt some relief but there was not enough slack to let me slip a hand out. I thought if I could see what I was doing it would help.

Again I got up on my knees and flexed my neck, turning my head from side to side. I rubbed my head against the ground. My hat came off and the shroud loosened. When I raised my head the material settled down on my chest. My eyes were uncovered and I could see again. I looked around warily. I expected my captors to be sitting nearby watching me. To my surprise there was no one around. I had rolled some thirty feet down from the trail and I could see people walking. No one appeared to be hunting the hillside for a drunk or anyone else.

My bound hands had to be dealt with. I concentrated on them completely. As preposterous as it was, I could see more clearly my first objective although my hands were out of my sight behind me.

I bent my elbows as I flexed my shoulders. My hands slipped sideways. The back of my right wrist turned against the front of my left wrist. I took a deep breath, willing renewed strength into my weary trembling body. Under intense concentration I made myself relax.

The tightness of the binding also seemed to relax. I wiggled and tugged my arms, pressing my wrists together. The binding ties cut into my skin but I kept pulling.

It was no use. The ties didn't give. I stopped struggling and rubbed my wrists together. My skin was raw and the ties stung with every move. I willed myself to relax. In all the workouts I'd ever been through, learning to relax had been a valuable part of the exercise.

Once more I tried, longer this time, my skin numbing with the pain. The widest part of my hand was so close to slipping through. I could feel the binding tie giving just a little. Pull! Strain! Keep the pressure on!

The ties were stretching with my efforts. Slowly, carefully I worked my relaxed hands under the sharp strings.

My right hand slipped out of the shackles. My hands were free! Painfully, but with a slow long forced breath I slumped forward and brought my stiff arms to my front.

I almost collapsed with the relief of my success. When blood tingled again through my sore muscles I yanked the gag out of my mouth and gasped deeply at the sweet fresh mountain air.