

CHAPTER SEVEN

Namche Is Bizarre

Afternoon light filtered through the needles of the silver firs. The sun's rays reached only indirectly into this part of the gorge, now that the sun was behind the high peaks. Although sundown wasn't for several hours, I had to squint in the waning light to see details on the hillside a few yards away.

I patted the stinging skin on my wrists with the chang soaked scarf. Although nearly dry, the alcoholic content of the chang relieved the chafing caused by my struggle with the binding string. I clasped my arms against my stomach and closed my eyes to think.

The horror of my kidnapping paled at the risk I'd taken to escape. My knees still trembled as I looked around, afraid I might be discovered any moment. I studied the lurking shadows and discovered they held no physical danger.

I sat on the faded worn blanket that had been wrapped around me and tried to think through the facts of my dilemma. I had to move if I was to find my way to the Inn before dark. I wasn't all that certain I could find my way in the daylight.

It seemed a very long time since I left my tent to go to Dawa's shop and buy that lovely tanka. How could have such a simple errand gone so wrong?

Kay would be concerned when I didn't return from the shop but would she expect anything unusual? By now she should have discovered that I didn't get to Dawa's shop at all. She would think that I was simply lost through a mistaken turn.

No matter what the conjecture back at the camp, I couldn't just sit here. My body ached with fright. My stomach hurt from hunger.

My forefinger traced the crack in the turquoise stone of my necklace. Did the necklace resemble one owned by the 'big man' in the valley? Or was it stolen? Was it a coincidence that I received it or was I singled out to wear it for some sinister reason? Doubts assailed my fear-racked mind. I clutched the stone in the palm of my hand, powerless to conjure up its secrets.

A feeling of helplessness was almost overwhelming as I looked with distaste at the Nepalese costume which had given me an aristocratic sensation a few hours ago.

The dark wool tunic had to go. I loosened the apron and spread it on the ground. I arranged the long braid carefully inside the hat and placed it on the apron. Then I pulled off the tunic and folded it to fit within the apron.

The thin chilly air made me shiver as I undressed but I dared not seek

the warmth of the woolen clothing. The Sherpani tunic would identify me to the culprits. A plan was forming in the labyrinth of my brain.

Namche Bazaar was packed with Caucasian tourists. Some of the more culturally sensitive ones might wear skirts over jeans but they did not wear the dark homespun clothing of Nepal.

Through my heightened senses the pain in my ankle nagged at me but the terror of being recaptured prevented it from limiting my movement. As long as I could walk I would get back on the trail and find the safety of my friends.

When I arose from the blanket I wanted to leave it on the hillside, but I rolled the blanket tightly and laid it on the apron. I wadded the chang-soaked shawl, wrinkling my nose at the thought of it. The sour smell was no longer nauseating. I shuddered in the chilling air as I wrapped the costume into a bundle.

The cold air penetrated my silk blouse and I shivered. I would have wrapped the scarf around my head and shoulders but, unhappily, I must do without the warmth if I was to have a tourist image.

I made several attempts before getting the dress, hat and blanket packed into the colorful apron. My ankle throbbed in protest as I knelt on bent knees in the process. I arranged the contents so I could use the apron ties to secure it all together.

Why I felt compelled to carry the clothes away, I couldn't explain. Somehow leaving them would create a mysterious disappearance instead of solving mine.

The turquoise stone reminded me of unwanted grief, flopping gently against my chest as I worked with my pack. I tucked it inside my blouse and buttoned up the collar to my throat. That hid the necklace very well.

One final look around assured me no menace lurked in the surrounding bushes. I hooked two fingers under the tie of the bundle and rose unsteadily to my feet.

With the help of hand-holds on the bushes securely rooted to the slope, I made my way cautiously toward the trail. The top of my hiking shoe rubbed my ankle and irritated my injury. The constant rubbing distracted my anxious mind from the painful bruise itself. I favored that foot as I inched my way up the bank.

From behind a thick bush at trailside I watched the traffic, worrying that every face might belong to one of my abductors. A thin film of sweat covered my body and I gritted my teeth to bring control my shivering.

Indian traders were leaving in small groups, but none looked toward me. Sherpas hiked down the trail in pairs or singly but the burdened travelers were intent on their own business and didn't look to either side.

In the time I watched and waited no one came up the trail. Dusk on this short December day was not far away. I must delay no longer.

I stepped out and hurried forward, the striped pack hung nonchalantly

over my shoulder. I forced my footsteps into a measured trekker's beat, limping in favor of my ankle.

My mouth smiled like a happy hiker.

My heart pounded like a loaded freight train.

The market place loomed ahead. I labored to reach the upper terrace where Paul and Kay had given me the early morning tour. Could I walk calmly past like a tourist? That's what I was after all. My instincts urged me on but every person held some menace and when they approached I worried anew.

I took a deep breath and made myself concentrate on the separate traders and their wares. My stomach knotted with fear that at any moment men would pounce on me. Desperation was taking over. If I wasn't careful I might do something impulsive and regret it.

I went forward without a real clue as to where the inn was. If the name had been mentioned I couldn't remember. Try as I might I could not think of any identifying feature of the inn. As I scanned the crowded houses in my anxiety, they all looked alike.

The buildings were large rectangular structures with two stories above the ground floor which was built partly into the slope. They were made of stone, without mortar, with the surface covered with clay and whitewash. The carved and painted wooden window frames had parchment for windows, although I could see some with glass. When a face appeared in a window, I looked away and hurried on. Which way I hurried didn't matter except that I reasoned it had to be in an uphill direction and that narrowed my options.

Perhaps someone could direct me to Dawa Sherpa's shop. That was a name I knew and once there I could find my way to the inn. The English speaking tourists I asked didn't know the names of any shops but a merchant with a jewelry table in the street recognized the name. My pantomimes were rewarded with directions he gave with hand signals.

I was headed in the right general direction so with a loudly pumping heart, I thanked him and moved on. The large stone buildings hemmed me in. I kept to the middle of the narrow streets, nervous about getting too close to the darkened doorways. My throbbing ankle slowed my pace. No one in the street showed more than the curious interest shown toward foreigners and I became less fearful.

Thoughts that my abductors weren't searching for me or had given up altogether didn't cross my mind. I had a terrifying premonition they were out there somewhere. I took some comfort in my tourist look. My appearance was so different from the Sherpa image that I began to relax and work on the problem of getting back to camp.

I strained to see a familiar face among the bobbing heads on the street.

Suddenly from out of a side street Paul appeared. He jerked to a stop when he first saw me, then rushed forward. My heart did a somersault and thumped joyfully back into place.

"Tina, where have you been?" His arms enveloped me in a smothering hug after taking a quick second look. He expected to find me dressed in the Sherpani dress.

My stomach lurched and my heart raced on. The after effects of my terror were still affecting my adrenaline flow. Concern for my ankle was forgotten.

Paul's hug was as warm as a glorious homecoming. He held me away from him to assure himself as to who I was then hugged me tighter still. He was warm and I was safe and I started to cry.

He rocked me in his arms with a rare sweet gentleness, murmuring soothing meaningless words of comfort and I was sure he cared. His image as a sinister player in my dreadful drama quickly fled.

"Let's get back to camp." He looked unbearably moved with stirred emotions as his strong fingers laid against my face to wipe the tears away.

I shivered uncontrollably. He took my package and tucked my shivering body inside his open jacket.

"Where have you been? You were gone so long. We were worried." He moved forward holding me so close my feet hardly touched the ground.

"I was hit," I gasped, when I realized he wasn't asking for my explanation.

"Did you lose your way? Or decide to explore on your own? You shouldn't go off sightseeing alone. We've all been searching, even the porters."

He was uncharacteristically flustered and tied up in his own frustrated feelings. I didn't think he was saying what was really in his heart, but he wasn't listening to me either.

I struggled against his arm and nearly screamed, "I was kidnapped!"

He turned to stare at me and held me away from him, frowning with disbelief.

"You what?"

"They thought I was Tickpay," I gasped. "The buffalo herder grabbed me and dragged me away."

The terrifying truth slowly registered in Paul's mind and his concerned expression softened to deep remorse. He folded me back into his strong arms and murmured against my hair, "Oh, Tiny, Tiny..."

His embracing arms felt too wonderful for me to risk anything that would remove them. I sobbed with relief.

"I didn't know you'd be in danger, my Tiny darling." His chin moved negatively against my temple as he whispered, "I really didn't know."

I absolutely believed he had not knowingly put me through this nightmare.

Against his hard masculine chest, inside his jacket, Paul carried me the short distance to the inn. We were in the courtyard in minutes.

Paul wrapped me in a down jacket. It was no substitute for his arms but I needed the protection from the chilling air so I cuddled into it. He picked me

up once more and took me up to the dining room of the inn where a charcoal brazier glowed. My chill was slowly replaced with a seeping warmth, both from the brazier and from my gathered friends, but I still trembled.

Everyone gathered around, impatiently curious about my disappearance.

Within the solid walls a feeling of safety spread over me like a warm woolen blanket. But reality prickled at me like so much raw wool. Questions assailed my mind, crying out for answers.

There must be more to the wealthy woman masquerade than Paul told me. There must be more to dressing me up like Tickpay than Paul's flair for dramatics.

"I was grabbed and gagged," I blurted in the midst of my friends' respectful silence. They stared in astonishment as I related every detail of my harrowing experience. I faced Paul.

"What about this Tickpay?" I demanded. "Why does some 'big man' want her back unharmed? What has the necklace got to do with her? Why didn't you tell me that masquerade you contrived was dangerous? Where are those men now? Why didn't they come after me when I got away?"

The more I thought about it the angrier I got. My anger fed on visions of the terrifying outcome that might have happened.

I poured out my anguish at being innocent of something I suspected they understood. I wanted answers to my questions for a change--a complete revelation of the dastardly plot.

My accusing glare considered every one of them. Were they all in on a conspiracy? Whispered conversations had been held beyond my hearing.

"I saw the buffalo herder down among the goats and went to pull him out," Harry said, "I tried to figure out what he was up to. I suspected his panic came from more than goats." Harry stroked his beard and leaned his head to study me more closely.

"You actually threw yourself off the trail," Paul whispered, watching me with an arrested expression, as if amazed by an unexpected glimpse of steel beneath my diminutive size to have managed such a courageous escape.

"I followed him down the trail a hundred yards," Harry continued, "He appeared to be on his way to Jorsale."

"Do you think he left Namche for good?" Paul asked.

"I think so. Maybe he thought Tickpay dropped into the gorge and he wouldn't get paid if she wasn't delivered," Harry said. Then he turned to me and added, "From what you heard of the conversation, the merchant didn't want her dead."

The reminder that I could have dropped thousands of feet into the river gorge subdued all other emotions boiling up inside me. The same concern crossed my mind in the helpless moments I laid below the trail but in the safety of this building that possibility had dimmed. I listened to exclamations of apprehension amid the scuffing of feet on the rough board floor.

In the sobering silence I realized answers were not forthcoming. The terrifying episode was as mystifying to my friends as it was to me.

Paul had to decide where to go from here.

"I'll take you back to Kathmandu tomorrow if you want to go back," he said, contritely.

He noted Lohloh's accepting nod before continuing, "We're to get paintings from lamas at the monasteries. I can send Lohloh for those and wait here for his return," His gaze moved over the others inviting them to speak for themselves.

More porters would be needed if our group split. Harry shrugged. He went up and down these trails almost as easily as the Sherpas so he could handle it either way.

The decision was up to me.

Even if my life was no longer in danger I was still at the core of this quandary.

"I'm too tired to think about a decision," I said, "and hungry, too." How my appetite returned was puzzling.

Everyone preferred to talk it over while awaiting my decision. We huddled around the brazier long after dinner discussing and rehashing the past events. My legs rested comfortably on the narrow wooden bench and I hardly noticed the pain in my ankle but the cold of the night air crowded in. A warm sleeping bag beckoned me.

I trembled thinking of the dark livestock byre I had to go through to get to my tent and I refused to go alone. Harry went down first and Paul followed, holding a flashlight on each step as I came down.

I was snuggling, fearfully, into my sleeping bag beside Kay when I heard Paul ask, "Can I come in?"

Kay hadn't undressed yet and she pulled her sleeping bag aside to make space for him. He came in with a minimum of effort and spoke with quiet firmness.

"I'm going to move Kay and spend the night here with you, Tiny." If he expected an objection I disappointed him.

"Then you don't believe those men left Namche?" I asked.

"You said there were three men. The buffalo herder may have left but we don't know where the others are," Paul pointed out.

Kay gathered her personal items and prepared to leave.

"I want to get out of Namche." That much I was sure of. I had to decide which direction I wanted to take.

"We can leave early to go on. There will be less chance of trouble if we all stay together," Paul stated.

I saw no need to disrupt the trek with demands that may be unnecessary so I agreed. With the buffalo herder gone, perhaps the worst was over, anyway.

Paul went to give instructions to Lohloh and sent a porter to move Kay's

things. Kay bundled her sleeping bag into his arms and sat beside me. There would be no reminiscing tonight before we fell asleep.

"Do you mind having Paul in here with you?" Kay asked.

"No, but do you think it's really necessary for Paul to guard me here? With the gate closed isn't the courtyard safe?"

"If he thinks he should be here, I do, too." Her voice dwindled to an unsure murmur.

A premonition of danger flitted through my mind, undefinable as a shadow. When Kay spoke again her tone was stronger and more confident.

"I'm sorry about this whole thing, Tina. I don't know about Tickpay. Stay close to Paul and he'll get you back to Kathmandu safely."

She hugged me goodnight. With my arms inside I couldn't hug her back. She grinned and kissed me lightly on the forehead. I turned my face away so she wouldn't see my tears.

Frigid air filled the tent when the flap opened to let Kay out and Paul in. He zipped the tent's double closure and arranged his bag. He took only a little more width than Kay required so I didn't have to move. I thought he would place his bag at least as far away as Kay did but it brushed mine when he laid it out. With my face turned to the tent wall, I couldn't be exactly sure of his position. I was not about to move and let him know how much I welcomed his company.

I burned to watch while he undressed, imagining his hard male length revealing a perfection only hinted at in his hiking clothes. I heard his boots thud against the tent floor as he removed them. The unmistakable sound of his jean's zipper ripped the silent air.

In my warm closed bag, I could feel his body as I did when he hugged me on the street. I could visualize with startling clarity how tall, fit and well muscled he was. A vision of him making love to me presented itself with equal clarity.

He grunted and turned off the battery lantern. I felt embarrassed, as if he had seen exactly what was in my mind.

After some rustling he settled into his bag.

If he thought I could go to sleep so quickly he'd better think again. After my wayward thoughts I had never been so wide awake as I was then. I wanted to tell him about my fears but something in his noisy movements made me keep my worries to myself. I pushed my unruly thoughts from my mind ran through the past events.

As innocent as it seemed at the time, I reflected how easily Paul had maneuvered me into playing the role of Tickpay. There was more than Paul's sense of the dramatic in his insistence that the charade for me would be simple fun. That was only intuition, I had no proof.

Kay knew I had gone, therefore, she appeared ignorant of whatever evil scheme lurked in the shadows of my mind. Perhaps she played a role simply

because she was my trusted friend. I wanted to hold her blameless.

All my misgivings centered on Paul, yet in my heart I wanted to hold him blameless, too.

He had been the key to my safety in the Kathmandu airport. I strained my memory to recall the features of the man who rushed into me but, try as I might, I did not remember seeing him anywhere since. He had been a fleeting figure resembling dozens of others who milled about in the waiting room.

It was the strength of Paul's body after the collision that I vividly remembered. His apology and hasty retreat were momentary disappointments that lent credence to his innocence in the incredible drama that since unfolded.

The customs agent sought his assistance to expedite my processing with Paul's language skills and for that I had been grateful and more trustful. Paul's offer of a ride was convenient when I sought transportation from those with whom I had no words to ask. Not once did his bearing nor his actions leave me with a suspicion of his motives.

Now I began to wonder. I thought once that he showed a glimmer of recognition when he first saw me in the airport but the significance of its impact held no meaning at the time. I was a stranger to Kathmandu, that instance of recognition completely misplaced. But now I speculated on the subtle undercurrents that flowed among those who only appeared in passing the past few days.

The measured looks he'd inspired from others I recalled might have been from formulating plans that led to this morning's abduction. After Kay's rejection that first night Paul had smoothly led me to masquerade as a Sherpani. Kay admitted he had maneuvered her as well.

He was absent when Burrah Sherpa presented me with the necklace that turned out to be far more infamous than I was led to believe. But even Paul's absence from the Sherpa gathering held a foreboding I couldn't identify at the time. With each subsequent appearance I recalled, his actions verified my suspicions of his motives.

Facts were clicking into place and I did not like the accumulating list. Unassailable evidence was piling up against this man to whom I was so emotionally drawn.

How ironic that he lay beside me for my protection!

He accepted my abduction too quickly as a matter of course although I believed he was genuinely sorry he had put me in danger. It was by his own admission that he was involved with the flight of Tickpay. I realized that his admission didn't reveal the details or the depth of his involvement. That realization stopped my reeling thoughts. I searched the darkness of the tent.

Not one noise from outside penetrated the tent. I could hear Paul's quiet breathing and listened carefully to the sound. It was steady and relaxed, yet I hoped it held a vigilance that would instantly alert him at the slightest sign of treachery--and I more fervently hoped that any treachery would not be at his

instigation.

I felt ominously threatened and strangely safe. My heart was all wrapped up in this mysterious figure and I struggled to break the bond. For my own sanity I had to get off this overwhelming roller coaster of emotions, rushing me from thrilling hilltops to menacing valleys, before I lost control.

I must have stirred because Paul picked up my troubled thoughts. His caressing whisper was so close to my head it stirred the air against my cheek.

"What's the matter? Can't you sleep?"

"No," I blurted. I should have kept quiet and let him believe I was asleep. His voice touched me with the same gentle concern I had received from his strong capable hands. I wanted to melt completely into his protection.

"You must rest," he said quietly. He made it sound so easy.

My arms ached where muscles strained from being tied behind my back and from the added pressure of rolling through the brush. My wrists still smarted where the binds rubbed against my skin. My ankle pained me sharply when I inadvertently touched it with my other foot. I had a cozy habit of curling my left foot around my right ankle when I bent my knees and slept on my left side. I hurt in many places with a nagging discomfort that no singular position seemed to appease. My whole body buzzed with exhaustion.

Paul's soothing baritone filled the tent, "The trail to Khumbjung is not as long or steep as it was to Namche. The wide footpaths are open. You can view the mountains as we go."

I expected the beauty of the peaks would be imposing and compelling. Their wild and rugged grandeur satisfied some aesthetic craving in my core.

Paul's lusty whisper distracted my mind from my discomfort, drawing my whole being gently and skillfully to a rising crescendo of desire. Did the effect he had on me come from my isolation among foreigners to whom I could not speak? Or was there a deeper unseen connection underlying his physical appeal?

I feared an unseen thread tying us together in an irreversible way like the warping strands of a mysterious tapestry and I stirred in search of a solution to the looming dilemma of my inexorable attraction to this mysterious man.

His radar was well tuned. He must have read my thoughts. I felt his hand rest on my shoulder. His concerned voice was so close to my face I caught his vibrant male scent and felt the exquisite warmth of his breath.

"Are you in pain? I have some aspirin," he whispered. His hand moved up to my face, searching for the zipper pull of my sleeping bag. Having found it, he hesitated, "Would it help if I rubbed your shoulders?"

I held my breath. I wanted his hands on me more than anything else in the whole world right now, this minute. I wanted to feel the security of his arms. I was chilled at the thought of my abduction, unsure of what the future held, but more completely petrified of my unbridled emotions.

"My shoulders are all right," I whispered, grateful that I didn't have to

raise my voice.

Whatever meaning he read in those words caused him to pull his hand back from further exploration and I regretted his withdrawal. The air was pregnant with desires, his and mine, but I couldn't bring myself to invite him into my sleeping bag.

"I'm still a bit frightened, that's all," I said by way of apology. I heard the buzz of his zipper and felt his hand wriggle beneath me.

Paul's arms encircled me, sleeping bag and all, and pulled me against his chest. The hood of my mummy bag was tight around my face. He tucked my head between his shoulder and his chin, bringing my back against his hard body. He pulled the open side of his sleeping bag around to cover his arms and snuggled tightly against me.

"You fit so perfectly," he said. Or was that my thoughts I heard?

"Try to sleep, Little One," he crooned.

I was exhausted, but sleep, I couldn't.

"I will guard you closely from now on, Tiny. I want you to feel the glory of the high peaks and learn the history of these people."

The comforting timbre of Paul's low husky voice continued to lull my fatigued body. He murmured all the history and geology and anthropology he had picked up in his lifetime of living with the Sherpas on the trails. He described Sir Edmund's investment of money and efforts in the region and New Zealand's part in forming Mount Everest National Park to preserve the land for the Sherpas. He knew every detail of the history.

He cared deeply for the people. He moved among them as if he were one. He told me I was one, as well. Hadn't the necklace proven that? Didn't the gift count for something? Didn't I truly enjoy my dance among the Sherpas? I drifted into sleep with his voice the comforting mantle.

Visions of the turquoise, whole and bright, floated above his husky whisper. It rolled and undulated on his verbal inflections. The blue was shattered by a flash of lightning and the pieces floated to become lofty mountain peaks.

Sherpas jumped haphazardly in my dreamtime, tying yaks to trees and dancing on their pointed horns. They cavorted on the mountainsides, keeping time to rhythmic clapping all the while. Hooded figures formed a circle and tightened around me, laughing wildly before they scampered into darkened livestock byres. Heaps of gemstones loomed before me and I desperately tried to climb a wall.

A comforting cocoon encircled me, whirling me through the universe while multicolored lights played like musical chords across my total field of vision. I was completely enraptured and the night sped by in a pirouette of glory.