

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### A Conjured Yak

The porter woke me from sound sleep when he brought warm washwater the next morning. I stared at the empty space where Paul had lain and understood why I had slept so soundly. A strange ambivalence struck me when I remembered his conversation last night before I fell asleep. He was only in my tent for my protection so why did I feel as though I'd been seduced?

His presence had calmed my fears. I was safe and it was morning and time to get up.

The morning star was bright near the peaks dimly lit by the lopsided pale moon. My tent was the only one standing and the porters brought it down almost the instant I came out with my backpack.

The yak handler lined up the lumbering animals that moved patiently toward the gate, their backswept horns making them look especially alert. The porters tied our supplies to the shaggy beasts in hurried solitude.

My breath turned to white swirls in the stillness of the gray dawn. We gathered beside the building around the hot tea pot. Plates of scrambled eggs were immediately put in our hands.

The air crackled with quiet urgency to get away from Namche before my assailants could see and follow. Few words were spoken and those only in muted tones.

There was an urgency to break camp. With heavy equipment loaded, the domesticated yaks lumbered through the gate with our tents and other gear at their sides, hung securely from a harness across their backs. We lined up and started the walk to Khumbjung.

The trail we were headed for looked like a light thread lying along side of the mountain a mile away. We had to cross most of Namche to reach the access point before we would indeed be on the trail I could see from here. A few trekkers trickled into the streets going in our direction.

The short steep climb to the level trail was not difficult as fresh as we were but my ankle complained more than I expected. I favored it as much as I could.

Though the day was sunny, the wind was cold and biting. I couldn't suppress a shiver. Advancing slowly toward us as we marched along, was the barren mountainside where lonely shrubs struggled for a hold in the stony soil. A pair of Tibetan ravens soared forlornly on the currents above, their heads turning from side to side as if to seek the trees which had long since been cut for firewood.

I turned on the trail to find Sunny approaching with her yaks treading a measured beat as if to a silent drummer under the burdens of our tents. I saw Paul contemplating her advance. He stood aside to let the animals pass single file. Sunny walked on the left side of the third yak and since I waited on the upslope side of the trail, she came very close to me. Her bright face held its usual smile and she greeted me, brightly.

"Good day for walk," she called as she approached, "Yesterday much better. Storm catch us now."

"Oh no," I called back, hoping she was wrong.

"Wise Sherpas gone. Go long way," she said as if that explained the undefined dilemma. She didn't linger. Her yaks plodded on, their heads nodding in time with their measured footsteps.

Paul hastened to catch up before her last words but she was many steps ahead of me. His eyes narrowed when he looked from Sunny to me and asked, "What did she say?"

"A storm is coming," I answered. The sky looked clear and I couldn't see a sign of a storm. I expected raging clouds to come in advance.

"Is that all she said?" He looked a bit skeptical. He turned his head while his eyes scanned the sky much as mine had.

"Something about wise Sherpas going far away," I added. That held no significance for me. If it meant anything to Paul, he didn't acknowledge it. He stepped ahead and waited for me to resume walking before he matched my step on the wide level path.

Paul was strangely quiet. He had said very little to me at camp and I waited for him to speak. I couldn't initiate a conversation. I was suddenly awkward and tongue-tied, acutely aware of his long lean strength and of my frailty. Each step on the trail jarred my ankle and I fervently hoped I would not be assailed with pain I couldn't hide.

The village of Namche soon disappeared below the ridge. All signs of civilization disappeared with it. Sometimes when the trail wound back on itself I could see my friends and the laden porters strung out ahead of me, but I felt beset by a strange isolation on this barren trail.

In the face of a bitter wind, I couldn't shake an underlying sense of danger. Paul's presence was comforting and I was surprised I didn't resent his

silence. He kept a vigil in both directions as we pushed ahead.

For half an hour we traversed the outer edge of the barren mountain. As we worked our way around, more snow-covered peaks came into view. Here the trail was sheltered and the force of the wind lessened. I was completely chilled and my ankle began to hurt.

The level parts of the trail were not so stressful but on the rock-strewn stretches pain intruded with every step. I tried to tough it out and I thought my walk looked normal.

Paul dropped behind me and shortly came up with a knurled stick. "Lean on this," he said, as he put it in my mittened hand, "We'll stop for tea within the hour."

The stick took most of my weight and relieved my ankle a great deal. I could walk a little faster but I was still far behind the others.

Paul stayed close by, feigning study of the scant growth along the trail. His real concern was for me and the slow progress I was making as my limp became more apparent. The more I tried to hurry, the more my ankle hurt.

The wind pushed at my back with an insistent chill and I saw Paul scanning the sky for signs of the predicted storm. It still wasn't visible to me but I didn't like the biting chill in the wind. The trail leveled out and I saw Harry and Kay going into the tea house for our morning rest stop.

The tea house resembled a Scottish stone fence gone wild. The building's thick walls were formed of stones with rounded edges and flattened sides chipped meticulously to settle tightly together for a solid wall. The stones were smaller and more irregular than those used in Namche, leaving the illusion of a hundred random cuts in a giant jigsaw puzzle.

The low building was windowless on the windward side with the only light coming through its low door. We were escorted into a dimly lighted room with a table laden with teapots, cups, and biscuits. I felt snug, warmly protected from the bitter wind.

Kay and Harry talked with the teahouse owners and the other members of the trek. Paul joined them and much of the conversation was in one foreign language or another. My ankle throbbed too much to encourage me to linger and listen to any language. After a quick cup of tea I found a bench in a shadowed corner and removed my high-topped hiking shoe.

My ankle was swollen from the whack it received during my roll in the bushes when I escaped from the buffalo herder. The ugly bluish bruise was surrounded by a yellow tinge and the bone hurt.

I folded my blue bandanna and wrapped it firmly around my ankle, pulling my woolen sock carefully over it to hold it in place. I slipped into my shoe and tied it.

At the door, Paul was slipping into his gloves, apparently waiting for me. He gave me a thin smile and nodded as we stepped out into the cold sunny air.

For a time I was refreshed and amazed anew at the majestic peaks around us. My footsteps were short and slow, favoring my ankle and I used the viewing of the scene as an excuse for dawdling.

Paul wasn't fooled. He adjusted his stride to mine, saying nothing to draw it to my attention, but by his covert glances at my leg, I could tell he was more aware of my difficulty than I had hoped.

"How're you feeling?" he asked, hesitantly. His tone was apologetic.

"Fine," I snapped. I felt he didn't really want to know. He didn't try to contradict me but I don't think he believed me either. I was obviously slowing the group's progress.

Kay and Harry disappeared behind looming bushes beside a bend in the trail ahead, the others already far beyond them. Occasional trees and more shrubs dotted the mountainside, an indication of less hostile growing conditions on this side of the slope. I surged forward with optimism, trying to take up some of the distance but Paul placed a hand lightly on my arm.

"It's all right," he said firmly. "There's no need to rush. We'll get to camp well before dark." His tone sounded amiable enough. Perhaps we could converse on friendly terms. Past experience with his mood changes warned me not to set my hopes too high.

He was right, though, I did feel an urgency to catch up with the others, not because of any concern about nightfall, but because of the weather. Gray clouds were beginning to darken at the base of the tall mountains. Paul's hand remained on my arm, a constant reminder that I could stay at a slow pace if that relieved my painful ankle.

His pressing hand somewhat stilled my concern. His nearness was a quieting factor at all times and after his concern last night his firm touch came close to mesmerizing me completely.

"My ankle is doing fine at this speed," I admitted, "for a while I thought I couldn't keep up at all."

I stood still to take in the commanding view of Ama Dablam. My eyes followed the sharp outline of 'Mother's Charmbox' from its snow covered flanks to the ice of its majestic peak. The dazzling white reflected earlier this morning in the bright sun had now lost its brilliance and become gray under the approaching clouds. The faded blue of the background sky no longer emphasized the pristine whiteness with which the magnificent mountain had been cloaked during the night.

Paul put his arm around me and spoke firmly in my ear, "Keep moving, no matter how slowly." The order was resolute but the tone was full of loving

affection. That warmed me more than his encircling arm.

Snow was coming. I scanned the precipitous slope, glad that there was no sudden dropoff.

"Will the snow come in a sudden squall?" I asked. Paul delayed his answer to my question while our hips moved in measured unison along the wide trail.

"The weather can be capricious," he admitted, "But sudden storms are unusual at this altitude in the Khumbu. Buddhist priests perform annual rituals to appease the gods."

His eyes were searching the sky. He bent down to grin at me. "I think they forgot to mention today's weather in last year's rituals."

Paul turned to look around and properly assess the menacing clouds. He held me tighter, placing my body length more fully against his.

We moved continuously and I leaned into Paul's body as we walked into each dip in the trail. He lifted me with each step as we moved up a rise. He pulled me against his side as we made each turn along the mountain's profile.

The scenery changed and I saw young trees clinging to the slopes with brush struggling to keep a foothold in their shadows.

The trail narrowed and was filled with jutting rocks, the points of buried boulders had been too large to move out of the way. The outer edge was steeper and without stretching my neck I could see nothing but open space where a slope had once held up the trail.

Paul waited for me to go ahead. We could no longer match our strides on the narrow footpath and I experienced a sense of loss when his hand left my shoulder. I glimpsed his hand outstretched for support although it didn't touch me.

Jutting rocks were worn into footholds. Parts of rocks were broken off and the irregular pattern was difficult for me to follow in my limping condition.

A sudden gust of wind pushed me and I stumbled, crying out as I twisted my sore ankle. I lunged trying to recover my balance. Paul's ready hands reached out to catch me.

I collapsed in his arms. He swung me to his chest and carried me for the next thirty feet up and over the roughest part of the trail. My hands clung to his neck and I pressed my head against his shoulder. The trail seemed to become level and I expected to be put down.

The steadiness of his breathing changed when he began taking sliding footsteps. He was stiff-leggedly digging his heels into the gravel below the trail, moving steadily downward. I clutched him tighter, pressing my body closer to his at each jolting step. Horror stricken at the thought of being pitched into the depths of the gorge, I clung more tightly still.

Beside a towering bush, he dropped my feet and grabbed my clutching arms. I wouldn't let him go. My eyes were squeezed shut with fear.

"We have to get out of the storm," he breathed heavily against the wind.

I relaxed my hold at his gentle urging. Dots of moisture cooled my face and I opened my eyes. Occasional small snowflakes whirled in the wind. A gulp stuck in my throat.

Paul pushed me beneath overhanging brush into a natural cave under a jutting boulder. I sprawled on my hands into the narrow space and huddled against the dirt, curling my legs under me to make room for Paul's kneeling form. He peeled my pack off my back and thrust it aside.

Too astonished to speak, I watched him remove his bulky gloves and then rummage through his pack. He pulled out the survival blanket that he unfolded and wrapped around me.

"You can't go any further until I check your ankle." He pulled a lumpy bag from his backpack before he sat back and stretched his legs across the front side of the cave. There was barely enough room to accommodate his length and the overhanging branches tore at his pants. He reached for my legs.

"Put your feet here," he said, patting his lap, "I want to have a look at that ankle." I sat facing him, his body perpendicular to mine, a little to my right.

With almost more effort than I could muster, I raised my knees up enough for his hands to slide behind my legs and pull them across his. My right foot laid close to the front of his jacket, which he unzipped and pulled apart to bring my foot closer for a better look.

He had the ties loosened and my shoe off in seconds. He folded the sock down over my toes and unwrapped the bandanna I'd used for a bandage earlier that morning. With my heel cradled in his left hand, warm fingers of his right hand expertly examined the bones from my arch to midcalf. His eyes flashed from my ankle to my face as he probed my swollen flesh and watched for any pained reactions.

At one spot immediately above the inner point of my ankle bone, his searching fingers brought a sudden pinch to my eyebrows.

"A strained muscle there," he announced, "but no evidence of a bad break." He fished into his first aid pouch and brought out an elastic bandage which he expertly wrapped around my heel and ankle.

Pulling up my heavy woolen sock, he rubbed my toes briskly between his palms, warming them before slipping on my shoe.

Only then did his gaze linger on mine long enough for my eyes to capture his. We studied each other for an extended moment. I saw a glimpse of

capitulation. He was completely willing to protect me. I looked to him, now, for further direction.

"Think you can make it the rest of the way?" he asked, pushing into his bulky gloves.

"I'll try."

We turned our attention to the front of the cave. The daylight had whitened. Simultaneously we realized it was whiter because of reflections of a million falling flakes of snow.

"Damn." The single word came his lips with equal parts of impatience and resignation.

The scanty evergreen leaves of overhanging alpine brush screened the precipitous valley from our view. Paul's bulky gloved hands parted the brush but the view of the valley was still obscured, now by a raging snowstorm. We were untouched by the biting wind behind thick brush. In the opening between Paul's hands, hard white flakes swirled in on the wind.

"So much for my ability to predict the weather," he groaned, "From now on I'll rely on Burrah's predictions instead.

I wasn't ignorant of the dangers of a blinding blizzard. I hoped Paul knew how to face one on the slopes of the Himalayas. I wanted to show my trust in him so I swallowed carefully and took a deep breath before I spoke.

"You had the foresight to find this cave," I reminded him. He brought me directly to it. The realization suddenly struck me that he must have known it was here.

"You told me you lived in Nepal for years. How long have you taken people on treks?"

"Six years."

"You really are familiar with this trail, then. You've been in this cave before."

"Yes," he admitted. "I holed up here once during a pouring rain, but that was more pleasant than this is going to be."

That wasn't saying much for my company. I couldn't think of a companion I preferred more than this handsome male. I hoped a harrowing experience wouldn't change my mind.

"Then you don't think we should go on?"

"With your ankle it would be risky," he murmured.

"I can walk. My ankle isn't broken," I reminded him. I disliked adding difficulties to his life regardless of how much I wanted to be alone with him.

"With your injury," he continued, as he watched me closely, "each condition presents greater obstacles. We could go on if we had a yak to carry you."

"I'll see if I can conjure one up for us," I said, mockingly.

"You do that," he grinned, "Meanwhile we'll see if we can make do with what we've got."

He tucked the insulating sheet, with the dubious label of survival blanket, under me. He took the corners and pulled one snugly around each shoulder.

"Where's your survival blanket?" He was into my pack before I remembered one was put at the bottom of every pack. He unfolded it and secured it around the edge of the cave opening with sticks from the bush, sealing out the cold. The temperature of the air around me seemed to rise almost immediately.

"There," he said, hunching down to settle back against the dirt beside me, "Is that better?" He had to bend his head, the rear of the cave wasn't high enough to accommodate his height. He slouched down but couldn't straighten his legs, the cave wasn't deep enough to accommodate his full length.

He squirmed into several different configurations and found none in which he was comfortable. I bent my knees and hugged them tightly, trying to take up as little space as possible.

Finally Paul crept into the position he had when caring for my ankle. Even then he had to hunch his shoulders, but he managed well enough by leaning against the contour of the cave wall. He grunted in satisfaction and, for a time, we settled into silence in the near darkness of our cell, listening to the swishing of the wind.

"How long will the storm last?" My voice soaked into the dirt walls.

"I hope it blows away in a few hours," he murmured, "but you see I'm not all that good at predicting weather."

I heard the mockery in his voice and I straightened to look at him to refute it. "Are you suggesting we might be trapped here for a long time?"

"I suggest you rest, for however long."

My eyes adjusted to the eerie darkness and I saw his wide eyes intently appraising me above his jacket collar bunched up around his face.

"You don't seem too concerned," I said.

His gaze never wavered but his eyelids narrowed.

"You must see wintry days like this where you come from," he said in a lazy thoughtful tone. "What do you do?"

"Stay in where it's warm."

"Now, why didn't I think of that?" The lines cut deeply into the corner of his eyes and he smiled as he snuggled deeper into his jacket collar.

Following his example I huddled into my jacket and pulled my chin into my jacket collar. I relaxed as much as one can, sitting on cold hard ground

with one ankle too tender to pull up against the other.

If I was going to sit here all night, I had to find a more comfortable position. I had drawn my legs up to make space for Paul's lean length and I longed for the relief of straightened knees. Paul noticed my discomfort.

"Are you cold," he asked?

"No, just uncomfortable," I answered. "I want to stretch out."

"Yeah, me too."

I laid on my side and stretched to fit the arc of the cave's rear wall, almost in a straight position that removed the stress from my ankle and my aching back. The insulating sheet stayed where my back had pressed it against the wall. I decided I was not cold so I left it where it was.

"You've got the right idea. Scoot out so I can get behind you." Paul scrunched down to fit the top curve of the cave and placed one knee behind me, lifting and sliding me over, giving him a narrow space in which to slip between the wall and me.

"Help me straighten this sheet," he said. The sheet was a reflecting plastic used for survival in severe conditions.

To do as he asked, I reached above him and grabbed the plastic. It took some fumbling before I was able to grasp it in my bulky mittened hand. When I tugged it up, Paul fit his muscled length alongside the back wall of the cave.

With grunting difficulty in the cramped space encumbered by bulky clothing, I managed to straighten the sheet over the top of him.

He raised himself up a few inches, pulling the edge he rested on out from under him, creating a narrow strip that he patted with an invitation.

"Here. Come here." It was a commanding order, offering no chance for refusal. I lowered myself, gingerly lying against his bent shape. He brought the top part down over me, effectively cocooning us within the folded sheet.

"You've got to turn on your side," he said, "and we'll fit better."

"Too bad we weren't required to carry our own sleeping bags," I said, rather flippantly, the memory of the warmth we shared last night still fresh in my mind.

"I like this better," he said as he pulled me closer, "but it still leaves a lot between us."

That was an understatement if I ever heard one. There was an awful lot between us. I wasn't certain I knew what he meant or where our proximity would lead to.

Now it wasn't a matter of my safety from kidnappers, it was a question of my survival, and Paul's too.

I snuggled into the intimate position. I didn't refuse his embracing arm anytime on the trek and in the biting cold his embrace was not only

comfortably warm but the most efficient use of space. The conservation of our body heat was critical. The fact that I enjoyed the arrangement warmed me from the inside.

"I'm glad you suggested this," he murmured.

"Just sharing some winter wisdom," I joked, careful not to press too close against him. I didn't remember suggesting this at all.

The wind raged beyond the bushes and the outside temperature filtered in, but our parallel spoonlike position kept our bodies from taking on the chill.

I felt warm and snug sharing our body heat. We were more than fully clothed. The insulated underwear fit like ribbed skin with none of the softness conducive to sensuous fondling.

"I've never been caught in a storm like this before," he said. "And I've been trekking with Lohloh for many years."

"I thought you said six years."

"I've been guiding that long. My Dad hired Lohloh to take me to Namche and Tengboche when I was ten years old."

Paul's voice faded away. I pictured the ten-year-old and smiled at the image. I decided not to question Paul. As it turned out, I didn't have to. His deep baritone voice prickled at my forehead, gently pushing at my escaping hair.

"My folks came to Nepal before I was born," Paul continued, "Dad was sent as an advisor to the king. It was unofficial and for my mother it was more of a holiday, but Dad took his job seriously. He learned the languages and went out among the people. I learned the Sherpa language and spent as much time as I could on the trails with Lohloh."

Paul slipped an arm under me and pulled me closer to his chest.

"Well?" His tone held a measure of impatience.

"Well, what?" The thought of his body behind me was distracting enough. The wayward thoughts his hands induced made me lose my train of thought. I didn't hear his question the first time.

"What about your winters? Did you ever stay warm like this before?" His voice sounded provocative.

"No." I almost didn't answer. I'd never been warm quite like this before.

"Anybody back home you want to keep warm?"

"No...You?" I wondered if that would sidetrack him. I couldn't admit there had never been anyone I ever wanted to sleep with before now.

"Me...what?" He sounded drowsy.

"Anybody you want to keep warm like this?" I wished I hadn't asked that. I knew so little of his private life--and loves.

"Yes." His voice was husky. I almost lost my breath.

"What's she like?" I really didn't want to know.

"You don't want to know." He was right.

"What makes you think that?" I couldn't let him know he'd read my mind.

"Go to sleep. Tomorrow's going to be tough."

He was completely and arrogantly sure of himself, even in a state of pre-sleep lethargy. I knew he was right.

The wind swished viciously across the bushes, forcing an irregular attack of scratching twigs at the insulating sheet. The plastic strained at its fasteners with a popping sound as the passing gusts pulled the covering out and then sucked it in with each capricious blast. The sheet billowed in concert with the wild rhapsody of my beating heart.

I must have slept and when I woke, cold seeped in on silence so profound I wondered if I'd died. I pressed back into the only source of heat and an iron band tightened around my middle. A startling moment passed before I remembered where I was and what was so warm behind my back.

Correction--who--was so warm behind my back. The pressure of Paul's arm remained constant. He managed to sleep on, unmindful of the hard ground beneath us.

We lay neatly together as if we were spoons in storage, my back against his broad chest, my bottom in his lap, my knees bent around his. In my mind I viewed the intimate position of our bodies with tightly closed eyes but with the deep sorrow of one who knows that the position was taken for survival not for love.

The pleasure of being in Paul's arms was not the shared pleasure I would have chosen. He was assuring our survival in the storm. He was alone with me simply because he was protecting me from the harmful consequences resulting from events he had put into motion, which he claimed went beyond his control. I wanted desperately to believe him but I was not naive.

His embrace would never be more personal than this. His first interest was in getting Tickpay safely away and there was a great deal of mystery surrounding his involvement with her. Was his interest in her simply monetary? Or was his interest deeper than friendship? Or was there something sinister behind it?

Underlying Paul's motive for helping Tickpay, his interest was in the money to be made for guiding the trek, profit from the scrolls he would sell, and satisfaction in moving goods over the mountain trails. Cool arrogance was all the emotion he had shown, although he often treated me with a tender concern. Occasionally he even appeared to be fond of me, if only in the image of a little puppy.

I savored this embrace for what it was--a sweet and poignant moment to treasure. The memory of being held like this could not be taken from me.

I shivered inwardly at my hopeless chances. The ground was hard and with the discomfort of unfulfilled longings, I began to feel every pebble as the pea in the mattress that identified the peasant maiden as a true Princess. I was a dreamer and fantasies came easy to me. My discomfort in the cold cave was one fact I could not deny.

The wind no longer raged and I wanted to get out and relieve my cramped body. I struggled against Paul's arm to change my position but in pulling up my knees our common cover gaped and cold air attacked my legs. I settled back to reconsider putting my warmth in jeopardy.

Dim light fused through gaps the wind had made in the sheet Paul fastened over the entrance to our cave. I strained to study the amount of light and judge the time.

The slightest action of my foot reminded me how tender my ankle was and I moved my legs gingerly, stretching stiff aching muscles. Then I bumped my ankle bone against the hard ground and muffled a cry of pain.

"It's too early to get up," Paul growled, tightening his arm to reemphasize his statement.

That was the first indication he was awake and my body fused unbidden with internal warmth.

"It's light enough to see," I said, shifting my hips in hopes of bringing a less intimate orientation to our bodies, if not a greater distance. The iron band released me as if a metal clasp had come undone.

He reached across me to pull the entrance cover aside with his bare hand. His sleeve slipped back baring his wrist. Powdery flakes sifted down from the disturbed twigs and turned to beads of moisture on his skin. The invading white light reflected moonglow, not the early dawn I expected.

"See what time it is," he ordered as he brought his radiant watch close to my eyes.

"Three o'clock," I admitted. It was too early to get up, or at least would have been too early to get out of a warm comfortable bed under normal conditions. How wonderful, I thought, it would be to experience this nearness to Paul as part of my normal conditions.

He settled back leaving some space between us. The air moved in and it was cold.

"We can get out and stretch," he conceded, "but we'll be snow covered when we come back."

"Shouldn't we catch up with the others?" It looked light enough to travel. I would feel better if we moved on.

"No. We shouldn't."

"Why not? It looks light enough. The storm is over."

Paul grunted. "You'd better have a look at the Himalayas." He nudged me toward the edge where we had entered and held the bush out of my way.

"I'm not afraid of a little snow," I lashed at him, defensiveness covering my indiscreet longings. I tried to be as arrogant and impersonal as he was, and, with my face averted to avoid the spilling snow, I pulled my stiff body past the bush into the blinding moonlight.

Paul didn't let me stop to behold the awesome beauty of the scene. He pushed out behind me, forcing me ahead in the featureless sparkling whiteness.

Snow sprung to melt on my clothes with each little puff that came with the forward motion of my groping hands and trailing knees. The slope was such that I couldn't keep my footing when I tried to stand so I scrambled away and sat, wrapping my arms around my knees to survey the sanitized scene.

The light from little more than half a moon reflected off the million crystals that blanketed the mountain side, bathing the scene in an eerie otherworldly glow.

The profile of the mountain peaks soared in stark splendor against the darkness of the sky. Every indentation of the ground was softened by the covering blanket of snow. The only features with character were the trees and ungainly bushes hovering protectively over shadows deep beneath their snow-laden branches.

The scene was enchanting to the greatest possible magnitude but I sat speechless, unable to ask Paul if he had this in mind when he predicted enchantment in Nepal that evening on our way to see the Sherpas. He made it clear then that my enchantment would not include him. I tried to invalidate that thought the moment it crossed my mind.

With the past reference to Paul came a flood of unbidden suspicions about him and my turquoise necklace. I wanted action. I wanted to escape the fear it brought to mind. Was this separation from the others another part of his plan to save the rich woman?

"Why can't we go on?" I asked. I tried to stand up and my feet slipped on the dry snow. I struggled in the loose gravel on the slope to get my footing.

"Where's the trail?" Paul answered me with a question that sounded incredibly obtuse as I tried to dust the snow off my seat and legs.

"Up there," I waved in the general uphill direction from which I was sure we came. The motion of my swinging arm upset my balance and I plunked back into a sitting position.

"Can you see the trail?" he asked.

Of course I couldn't. Snow obscured the trail and disguised its distinct features. I couldn't believe he would not be able to find it in the snow.

"Oh, I can find it all right," he admitted, "but it's tough walking when dry, think about slipping in the snow. If we had a yak..." He didn't have to finish that sentence. He reminded me many times that surefooted yaks could be trusted to stay on treacherous trails.

He rummaged in his pack and pulled out a granola bar.

"Are we going to sit here until the snow dries up?" I demanded. Snow in this temperature could last for days, although the air did not hold the biting chill of the earlier wind.

"Eat this and enjoy the moonlight," he ordered, handing me half of the granola bar.

"We can stretch our muscles and then hole up for a few more hours. We'll wait for the Himalayan sun to work its wonders."

"Do you expect the snow to melt right away?" I asked, after I chewed for a while on a bite of the bar he handed me. It took some thought before I understood the implication of his statement.

"Yes, I'm sure of it, now that the sky is clear. The sun at this altitude comes through quite strong. Unfortunately sunrise is a long time off."