

CHAPTER NINE

A Yak Delivered

The moonlight glistened on the millions of icy crystals reflecting enough light for me to clearly see Paul's taut strong jaw. He looked off to the east and his proud handsome profile against the dark blue of the night sky stirred me fiercely.

The world was quiet and we were the only inhabitants. I wondered if he was as deeply moved by this isolation as I was. I took the last bite of the granola bar and stuffed the crumpled wrapper into my pocket.

Paul glanced sideways at the noise and I stood up, wanting to get back into the shelter. As much as I admired the beauty of the moonlight on the snow, I worried about my survival. The frigid air was seeping into my clothes and there was nowhere to pace. The slope was too slippery under the dry snow for me to maintain my footing.

"I want to go back inside," I announced with a shiver.

Paul shook the snow off the bushes and brushed at the ground by the entrance to the cave, clearing a path so we wouldn't drag loose snow with us when we entered. The fluffy dry snow puffed up with each swipe he made.

Making a bare spot in front of the cave entrance was difficult but with his large insulated mittens, Paul succeeded in pushing the sparkling dust away downslope. He uncovered the dirt in an area wide enough for us to stand on. Dusting the dry flakes off our clothes with our mittens was easy. We took turns brushing the snow off each other.

"C'mon," he said as he waved his hand toward the entrance, "I'm anxious to have you in my arms again." He didn't wait for me to enter.

I stood stark still, wondering if I'd heard him correctly, watching his body disappear, head first, into the cave. I hesitated, hearing dull rattling sounds of the survival blankets. He was obviously straightening and rearranging them for another warm session and this time I was curiously stirred by the prospect.

"Hurry up. You'll get hypothermia if you stand around out there much longer," he said, his deep voice strangely muted by the cave walls.

I went in head first as he had, feeling my way in the sudden darkness. My hand struck his hiking boots first and I strained to see that he put his head at the opposite side of the cave. At the time I didn't realize that would mean laying on our left side instead of our right as we had earlier. I would appreciate

it fully since my injury wouldn't rest on the hard ground.

I got up on my knees inside the cave but Paul's bare hand caught me under my left arm as soon as I was inside and pulled me into his embrace against his full hard length, resulting in the same spoonlike position I enjoyed before.

He tucked the survival blanket around the front of me and settled quietly, keeping a loose circle around me with his arms. I shifted restlessly to fit the contours of the stones beneath me. That was an exercise that couldn't be hurried, nor could it be done with the first testing maneuver.

"Are you going to be still?" he asked, with a cold patience that reminded me that I was wiggling to fix a place much like the turning of a dog preparing to lie down.

"You want everything, don't you?" I felt strangely repelled by his gruffness yet as magnetically attracted to his voice as if it was loaded with steel shards. I couldn't stand up to fatal piercing of my heart. His flippant remark about holding me in his arms had simply been a flippant remark. He was cold as steel and he wanted everything his way.

"Not everything," he murmured, "Just you."

My heart stopped, I think, at the words. When my heartbeat resumed, it skittered all over the place. I tried to turn sideways to look into his face but he held me firmly.

"Be calm so the blankets stay in place," he said in a husky low voice.

"How can you expect me to stay calm after all the trouble you caused?" I was exasperated at his earlier expression of pleasure at holding me in his arms. Helpless confusion washed over me.

As much as I liked to feel his arms around me, I wouldn't give in to his seduction. It wasn't that I wouldn't enjoy the seduction, I couldn't bear to face the rejection that was sure to follow an affair.

"I thought you enjoyed being in my arms," he said simply.

"I do," I said bluntly. "But you're so arrogant and bossy. Don't think I'm willing to forget the awful experiences I've had just for a fling with you."

"What's your definition of a fling?" he asked, "Keeping warm during a hazardous storm? Exciting hugs and kisses? Or real loving in bed?"

"All of the above," I admitted reluctantly.

"A fling is not my style," he said defensively. "I don't maneuver women into my bed. You're something special."

"That's hard to believe," I said doubtfully. "After what I've been through, Tickpay seems more important to you than I do."

"I wanted you in my bed before any of this Tickpay stuff," he said, firmly.

I lay hushed and breathless, recalling my earlier visions of sharing his warm bed.

"You act like women come easy to you," I retorted, surprised my voice was steady and cool, even if the tone was a little husky.

"I never gave any other woman a second thought," he mused, his tone thick with wonder, as if the realization just struck him.

"I didn't get any second thoughts either." I reminded him he rejected me at every turn.

"I tried not to think about you," he assured me. "Using you to help a friend seemed harmless enough. I thought I had it all figured out." Tones of regret kept his voice to a whisper.

"You didn't plan the attacks?" To hear his denial was important. I wanted desperately to trust him.

"I planned to have you appear as a decoy among the Sherpas so Tickpay could leave Kathmandu. I didn't know it then but Kalle Laang had caught and beaten her for leaving the first time. She was no stranger to his violence."

"When did you meet Tickpay?" I asked. I still believed that woman meant more than just a job to him.

"I never actually met her," he said, and I could feel him shaking his head. "Burrah Sherpa begged me to get her out of the country. I was at the airport trying to arrange to put her on a plane when you arrived."

"So? Is Burrah Sherpa her father?" I wondered. "How did you expect to whisk her away if she wasn't there?"

"Burrah Sherpa is a friend of her uncle. His man at the airport told me you looked very much like Tickpay, even your size..."

"What about the necklace? The gift surprised you." At least I thought at the Sherpa gathering it had.

"Yes. I knew that it represented Kalle Laang's wife. I never dreamed it would put you in danger."

"Obviously she escaped him again..."

"She was rescued by Burrah Sherpa's friends who helped her get the turquoise necklace, which was her dowry when she married Kalle Laang. They helped Burrah Sherpa get her to the Sherpa gathering."

"And you didn't know she was there?" I didn't think it was feigned surprise he showed when he saw the turquoise necklace around my neck.

"News of her escape with the necklace was known only to those who helped her. I didn't know where Tickpay was but I was told she was taken out of Kathmandu that night so one appearance of the necklace would throw off the men searching for her.

"Kalle Laang was furious but didn't tell his hired men to search for a battered woman. He wanted the woman wearing the necklace. Of course, Kalle Laang expected Tickpay to be wearing it."

"By then it was hanging around my neck," I inserted with a shiver. "I was so bewitched by you the necklace was like a lease. You could have led me anywhere."

"Really..." His huskily pitched voice vibrated with rare sweet gentleness. His arms tightened around me and his strong jaw nuzzled the top of my head.

My heart turned over in helpless joy as I clung for a rapturous moment to the hope that he really cared for me. I still didn't trust him. I had to know more about Tickpay.

There was a lot of mystery to unravel before I could believe his declarations would lead to a permanency I'd accept. I struggled to put my heart aside and keep my mind clear to ask pressing questions.

"Did you tell Kay to have me wear the Sherpani dress the next day?"

"No, that was her idea," he said, "but knowing how violent Kalle Laang was, I worried when I saw you on the street. When the water buffalo came along I had the perfect excuse to hurry you into Harry's. The buffalo herder's reappearance proved I wasn't quick enough."

"Why did you try to catch him?" I asked. That whole episode reeked of evasion every time I thought it over.

Paul quickly explained. "I had to find out what his interest was. He admitted planning to steal the necklace. I don't think he knew anything about Tickpay when he pursued you to Namche."

"He was crafty enough to let the others think I was Tickpay," I injected. He was the one who stuffed the stinking rag in my mouth. I shuddered at the recollection.

Paul rubbed my shoulders, lovingly, while he spoke, "The buffalo herder was also wise enough to leave before the fraud was discovered. He'd been involved in a great deal of thievery. That's why he left when Harry took an interest."

"So, what happens next?" I asked

"I don't know what will happen next," he said, "Tickpay is far away. Burrah Sherpa took her away before the storm. We don't know who else was involved in your kidnapping. You saw three men and only one you could identify to us. If you see the others, you can point them out to me."

"Then you expect them to show up again," I said, involuntarily tensing my body against his.

"We'll have to wait and see," he said. "When Kalle Laang gets word that Tickpay is out of Nepal, I think he'll call off his men. We'll stay on guard until we're sure."

The pressure of his embrace was comforting and he offered to say no more.

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The woven clothing hung in unfamiliar folds from their shoulders as the Sherpas resolutely fastened their disguises.

Tickpay still feared her husband. He would have men searching for her but she doubted that his cronies would look for her in the midst of Indian traders. She raised her shoulders to emulate the confidence of a successful trader.

Traditional Sherpas would never accept the remote possibility she might dare to masquerade as a man.

A thin smile resolutely on her face, Tickpay silently thanked the American professor's guest for giving her the idea--not that the lovely western tourist would ever know.

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Paul noticed I favored my ankle after an hour's walk and he urged me to sit on a jutting boulder. Young silver firs dotted the mountainside, vivid proof of the dedication to reforestation by Nepalese and New Zealanders. Patches of snow lingered in their shadows, evidence that laws concerning the trees of Sagarmatha National Park were being observed.

After cutting of firewood within the park was forbidden, park officials planted seedlings. The saplings that survived were now over fifteen years old and on this slope the sturdy trees prospered.

"I've never seen snow disappear so fast," I remarked, shaking my head in wonder.

We had a muddy start after hours of confinement in the little cave. Puddles formed in low places in the path but we made good progress and were close to the inn where we had expected to stop for tea yesterday.

"The sun and the high dry air are what did it," Paul answered. The faint stubble of beard emphasized his finely drawn masculine profile. I don't remember ever meeting a more handsome man. His voice was clear and his tone was cordial. He'd accepted my reservations about our relationship since our moonlight talk but he voiced the hope that I would trust him completely before we returned to Kathmandu. I agreed to help him identify the missing men if they did show up.

I was in love with Paul--I knew that now as I met his gaze with quiet sincerity. His eyes reflected his loving regard for me and we shared a lover's smile.

We were keenly attuned to each other. I noted his every movement.

He suddenly stood alert and raised spread fingers to plead my silence while he listened.

A man swathed in dark flowing garments appeared around the bend in the trail. His sturdy walking stick was a crooked branch with several odd carvings I strained to identify. He leaned on it heavily to prevent his slipping on the wet trail. He greeted us with a perfunctory nod as we stood up.

He was one I'd seen somewhere, I thought. In the past week I paid more attention to the distinct features of the people and was able to distinguish individuals I'd met before.

Movement beyond him drew my gaze and I recoiled when I saw the shaggy animals behind him. Yaks lumbered along, herded by a thin dark man

waving short blunt sticks over the trudging animals.

Paul caught my action and jerked his head, extending his hand to help me move up on the boulder out of the way. I eyed the yaks warily, although they appeared no more menacing than the zums that passed on the trail near Jorsale. I was vaguely aware that the lead man with the walking stick stepped up on the slope beside us to wait for his animals to pass.

The yaks appeared docile enough, not at all like the 'yak gone berserk' we encountered several days ago. Only one had a pad fastened on its back, marking it as a carrier of a heavy load. Its white hump made it look more formidable than the others, although each had distinguishing white spots of long hair in various places on their shaggy bodies.

Five animals patiently plodded along in single file, each head bobbing lethargically in time with its pacing feet. Their eyes were dark and lazily lidded, as if we were of no consequence. That didn't stop me from mentally trying to hasten their passage.

When the first one was in front of me, the herder swung his stick and yelled, bunching the five animals frantically together. I watched in horror, expecting the beasts to be driven up the boulder. The herder's calls oddly seemed directed to us instead of the cattle they were driving.

"He says we should be still," Paul translated, his arm protectively in front of me, his eyes on the driving herdsman. I thought Paul planned some action and I looked up at him.

To my horror, the oddly carved stick of the lead man beside me cracked against the back of Paul's head with a loud thwack. I vainly grabbed at his arm as he slumped down beside the boulder under a dozen flailing hooves. It was safer on the boulder so I scrambled to keep from falling under the shuffling herd.

"Put her on yak," the voice of the lead man commanded. Instantly I recognized the man from the livestock byre at Namche and screamed.

Another thwack split the air and a thousand flashing lights erupted somewhere inside my skull.

My head throbbed mercilessly, preventing my eyelids from opening. I couldn't figure out why my head was rocking against a warm furry blanket. Such soft warmth should have been a comfort but my head seemed to split a little more with each pulse of my pumping blood. I went to raise my hand to the aching part of my head but my hand was bound against the soft hair. My eyes opened slowly, widening with the horrifying realization that I was draped over the back of a moving yak.

I clutched fistfuls of the hair viciously and gathered the energy for a earth rending scream. The surprised yak lurched ahead and broke into a belling gallop. It lurched and bucked to dislodge me.

Engulfing panic turned my consciousness to mush and I bounced in and out of a blissful dark safe place. I wanted it to be Paul's strong warm arms.

I struggled to instruct my eyelids to open.

"She's coming around."

That wasn't Paul's voice. Someone else was in my safe dark place. Warm hands cradled my face. Paul never touched me like that. I opened my eyes and Kay swam into view.

"Tina, can you hear me?" she asked, distraught at my fluttering eyelids and glazing focus.

"They killed Paul," I wailed when I could see I had been rescued.

"Is he on the trail?" The voice came at the top of the hairy columns, I realized, as my eyes followed them up past the tan shorts and dark red shirt to Harry's face. I wanted him to get Paul's body away from the plundering hooves.

"Didn't you find his body?" I asked with the sinking feeling that the stomping yaks had totally obliterated him.

"Lohloh went to find him," Kay assured me. She held a cold pad against my throbbing head.

"Where did you find me?"

"You came galloping in on lively yak," Harry said in a silly tone. "Where did you learn to ride like that?"

Yes, I did remember hanging over the yak that passed us on the trail.

"We want to know what you were doing," Harry insisted.

"I don't know how I got on the yak." Slowly I was able to remember what happened before Paul fell under threshing hooves. I explained what I saw.

"You have a lump on the back of your head the size of tablespoon but I suppose you figured that out for yourself." Kay held cold compresses to my head and I floated in and out of reality when Harry left.

I lay in physical pain but far worse emotional agony to think that Paul had once again been a party to a horrifying episode evolving around my masquerade as Tickpay with the turquoise necklace.

The Canadian doctor at Sir Hillary's hospital in Khumbjung, a few kilometers away, had been summoned. By the time she arrived, the world had stopped spinning but my senses functioned under less than full power. The nauseous inclination had subsided.

I felt some pride when I discovered I hadn't thrown up. With the small amount of food I'd had in the past twenty four hours, it was not surprising there was little to inspire the humiliating performance.

Kay had been able to get me to swallow some water and later, a few spoonfuls of chicken broth. She sat quietly beside me, satisfied with the doctor's prognoses. I was lucid and would recover.

The doctor found my reflexes unimpaired and was optimistic of a complete recovery. There may be a hairline crack in my skull and she insisted I rest until the visible lump went down. Later, if I felt up to proceeding on the trek, I should check in with her at the hospital when we continued.

Khumbjung had been included somewhere on our itinerary before the storm caught us. I, at least, would remain on this bunk for the time being.

"You need not be so anxious," she admonished, gently. "Your friends will care for you and the owner here will look out for your safety."

"It's not me," I denied. "Paul..." I choked and for the first time tears flowed at the thought of his bloody body.

"Lohloh and Harry went to get him," Kay answered the doctor's questioning look. "Tina saw him struck and fall among a herd of yaks." Kay repeated my story as I had told it several hours ago.

"I know that guide. Paul has a head as tough as yours," insisted the doctor as she rose. "I'm going to check with the hospital to see if I can linger for a cup of tea."

She patted the radio clipped to her belt and moved her pack to the table on the far side of the room. The anxious owner joined her in quiet conversation. She was going to stay until Paul's body was brought in, I thought, and I put my fist in my mouth to suppress an audible sob. I felt so empty and cold and totally bereft.

My sorrow at the loss of him would not be contained for some time. I wallowed in self-pity. The back of my eyes burned from the tears.

"Tina, don't be so sure he's dead," Kay counselled. She watched me thoughtfully while holding the cold compress against the lump on my head. "You are in love."

"What did you say?" I think I heard her and feared she had made the correct assumption but the spoken words put a fierce finality to the thought.

She smiled slyly, a knowing look in her eyes. "I'd say he's more suited to you than those Scandinavians you date at home."

"He's arrogant and aloof and busy with his own life," I admitted. There wasn't a long list of things I could find to dislike about him. He was like the mountains, hard, cold and unrelenting.

"Tina, admit it, you're in love with Paul." Kay smiled smugly at me as she turned the cold side of the compress to my head.

"Does it show that much?"

"I'm afraid so. Want to tell me where you were during the snow storm?" Kay was gently curious. She had no doubt that Paul would find a safe place to wait out the storm.

"There was a cave.... That was before the snow came. My sore ankle slowed me up at first. Then I twisted it and Paul didn't want to make me sit out in the wind."

"And you shared some intimate moments..." Her tone implied much much more.

"Not really. We huddled together fully clothed." I didn't want to share the details. "I think he's immune to me."

"I wouldn't say that." She countered.

"Why not?" My eyes opened so fast my head came up, spinning the room around me once again.

Kay pushed me back and studied me for an agonizing minute. Her eyes wondered over my face and narrowed when they came to mine. "Paul's able to hide his emotions better than you are. His affection runs very deep. He's dated other women but he never treated any one the way he treats you."

"I should hope not. Sending them to be kidnapped or knocked unconscious wouldn't exactly bring them flocking back."

"He didn't do that and you know it," She refused to believe in Paul's death and echoed the doctor's statement of his tough head. "I can't explain the terrifying events away, Tina, because they happened, but he didn't want to bring you any harm."

"It doesn't matter. He's dead. I saw his bruised and bloody body before I was knocked out." I closed my aching eyes to reconstruct the bloody scene in my memory.

I retreated to the inner recesses of my mind, searching for last impressions of the incident on the trail--the approaching Nepali and his unconcern, Paul's protective arm and his translation, the frenzied buckling of the line of yaks, the sturdy stick hitting Paul from behind, and finally, my belated recognition of the man who studied my turquoise stone in the darkness of the livestock byre in Namche.

Those sequences played over and over in my mind with each replay adding more details. When the Nepali first approached, his expression was unclear because I was distracted from him, filled with total fright when I saw the yaks. I dug and dug in my memory for more details but could not recall seeing any expressive sign passing from the man to Paul. No feigned greeting was made to indicate Paul was meeting an accomplice to my abduction.

The blow to Paul's head was swift and decisive. I relived his melting collapse and his subsequent slide into the bunching animals. A hope washed over me as I pinned the memory of that sudden tiny episode firmly to my consciousness.

If that was contrived to convince me of Paul's innocence it had gone way too far. The blow was real. I watched his strong powerful body drop. I now imagined the yaks veering away from him as he slipped, bonelessly, down alongside the boulder, not bloodied as before. Conflicting visions swam within my memory.

I thought I could believe in Paul's innocence. I wanted him to be innocent. Suspicion would not be pushed aside.

He was most insistent that I play the part of Tickpay in Namche. He acted appalled at the disastrous results so he must be innocent. He appeared surprised when he first saw the turquoise necklace around my neck at the Sherpa gathering, yet he talked me into wearing it again and again.

The times I caught clandestine glances between Paul and others danced

maliciously in my mind. I could hardly pass them off as commendable communications anymore, although each time I let my ignorance of the language excuse my lack of understanding their real significance. I gave up the mystery of it all and tried to restore my own well-being.

Lohloh and Harry returned before dark to report that Paul had disappeared. They found the spot where he fell but tracks of milling cattle made it impossible to figure out what happened. They searched the surrounding area and found no sign of him and they assured me there was no blood on or near the boulder where I saw him fall.

My suspicions returned. The attack on him had been faked after all.

I curled up in a morose stupor and, without good friends, I might have shriveled away.

Kay made me get up to eat. Harry made me walk in the fresh air several times a day. Both helped the return of my good sense and I realized how foolish I was to mope over the loss of a lover I never had.

No one claimed the animal Harry subdued to rescue me. He tied and guarded it, hoping to catch the owner if he showed up. Four yaks were noticed taking another trail but no one associated them with the offender Harry had tied to the tree behind the humble stone hut.

If Paul was dead it was something I could mourn but not allow to destroy my health. If he disappeared it was because he was not innocent in this terrible drama playing out around me and I would have to go on living without him.

With or without him, I was still in danger. Harry guarded me day and night, ever watchful for someone who may come to claim the yak, wary of every stranger because he had not seen the man. Kay sat by me when I rested. My ankle healed and I soon sought activity to pass the long hours.

We tried to be helpful to the Sherpani of the house, pumping at the churn to make yak tea, hanking the yarn she spun from goat hair. Kay encouraged her help me learn the Sherpa language. In turn I was to help her with her English. She laughed when she showed me a tiny ball of yarn she'd made from black and white hairs combed from the tethered yak that seemed to be contented with Harry's attention.

"You 'member wild ride, good yak," she grinned. Her cheerfulness helped to wash away my lethargy.

Lohloh had gone on with the other trekkers to pick up the scroll paintings from the monks at the monasteries in Pangboche and Tengboche. They took the required porters for their gear and comfort. They could make stops at tea houses along the way.

The cooks stayed to attend to food for me, fixing meals over Paul's kerosene stove. They spent their time in the livestock byre separated from the living room by a narrow stone wall.

This stone hut had an open hearth where the woman bent over a wood

fire to cook vegetable stews, breathing in the deadly smoke that would likely bring lung disease and shorten her life.

The smoke seeped out through the thatched roof, leaving the tightly woven reeds black and fetid. The thatching overlapped and was supported by hand-hewn beams installed long before tree-cutting was abolished in the park.

Mudpacked walls were fashioned of two-foot thick field stone, meticulously fit together without mortar by patient stone cutters, still in demand for building homes. A windowless wall set into the bank on the uphill side protected the Sherpas from the coldest winds. Harry assured me this was typical of older homes in the remote villages.

Homes of the wealthier were built of the same thick stone but the living quarters were on a second story, leaving the ground floor dark and windowless. If it was available, kerosene was used for cooking, in which thatched roofs were replaced with slate or corrugated steel to discourage vermin that took naturally to living in the thatching, unless subjected daily to wood smoke.

Except for the forced confinement and my own enforced bereavement over Paul, my stay with the Sherpas was a pleasant one. No strangers came by. Harry and the cooks regularly visited other huts to check on visitors that stopped elsewhere in the village. No strangers were reported.

Idleness didn't suit me and I was ready to go back to Lukla and Kathmandu as soon as Lohloh returned regardless of the impending danger. To quietly wait for some unknown menace was wearing on my nerves. The entire time we were here had been quiet. To go on this way seemed impossible. Was this the proverbial lull before the storm?

Paul was gone. Dead or alive, he had not returned. A sinister man was out there somewhere waiting to strike again. I looked at the village people as we walked among them.

Harry put a stilling hand on my elbow, a sign that we should return to the stone hut. We had walked above the village as usual, thinking our separate thoughts. He seldom offered conversation. That left my thoughts to roam over the landscape and sights in the village below.

Children spilled out of the school building and scattered for their homes. Two boys stayed in the school yard to throw and catch a large ball. Their grasping hands brought a chilling memory of menacing hands grasping me. For the hundredth time in several days I thought of my predicament.

The baseball expression, three strikes and you're out, was often applied pessimistically to many of life's events. The first two abductions had failed. If another attempt was made, I hoped it wouldn't be the third strike that put me out.

"We'd better be heading back, Tina " Harry insisted.

The sun's rays no longer warmed us. Old Sol slipped below the edge of the mountain and let the real temperature of the thin air at thirteen thousand feet creep upon us. We'd walked above the huts of the village, on the slope

among the rhododendron trees, enjoying the last quiet minutes we would have in this delightful setting. Lohloh arrived from Tengboche and our return trip would start at first light tomorrow.

"I've begun to feel safe here," I murmured. "I'm not sure I want to leave." I shivered at the thought of, once again, being thrust in the midst of grasping strangers.

"You're not going to be safe until Tickpay gets out of her husband's reach. Retracing your steps and confronting him may be the only way to prove who you are." Harry's revelation was the most information I'd had so far. He looked askance at my gasp before he continued, "As long as his hoodlums believe you're Tickpay, you're in danger."

I stopped to stare up at his massive hairy face. His bulky shoulders were formidable in themselves but the enormous beard and bushy eyebrows surrounding his piercing eyes gave him the look of a creature to be feared.

Although he was not as tall as Paul, I felt like a child beside him, his size alone lending greater importance. As a bodyguard over these past days, he served me well. He inspired trust and I certainly felt safe in his presence. We rarely spoke, and then only to discuss the weather, so for him to offer this warning was a monumental surprise.

"All this time, on our walks, you've expected trouble?" My feeling of safety was an illusion and it was shattered.

"At first I relied on the people to inform me of strangers," he admitted, facing me and placing his massive hands on the points of my shoulders, "He may not be a stranger to the people here."

We had walked around the village, I thought, to restore my strength and revitalize my ankle muscles. I was paraded around like so much bait. My chest swelled with anger as much as fear.

"You're the only one who can identify the man who hit you," He pleaded. "I could walk past him twice a day and not know he's the one. Don't you see?"

I dropped my chin and shrugged. We turned toward the village. He put a consoling arm around my shoulder and we walked silently, as we had before, each wrapped in our own thoughts.

My eyes no longer relished the enchantment of the majestic peaks above or the charming village below. I was searching the growing shadows for the unknown menace lurking there.

Walking the downhill path was easy and we soon moved between solid stone huts, smoking with cook fires in the gathering chill of late afternoon. Few people were about, the coolness of the coming evening had driven most of them inside, for heavier clothing, if not for the evening meal. The path was wide and our footsteps made little sound on the packed clay.

Voices carried faintly and became louder as we approached a hut. A heated discussion was in progress and we almost tiptoed to prevent intrusion even though we were nowhere near the adversaries. Inaudible words poured

forth with angry overtones. A forceful answer, equally inaudible, hit the thin air with finality.

Something familiar about the tone of the speaker made me catch my breath. The familiar baritone profoundly stirred my soul. Harry felt my reaction and stopped me in the shadows. I wondered if he recognized Paul's voice, I was so certain that was what I heard. Harry raised a hand to hold my silence.

The air of the entire village seemed to echo the retreating footsteps. The argument had ended on Paul's forceful words.

Measured footsteps became louder, apparently from someone coming toward us from the rear of the building, walking with a halting gait. His path would cross ours and I huddled behind Harry the instant he came into view. He paused in the open street, leaning on his walking stick and looked the other way. I was relieved. It was not Paul.

For a heart stopping minute I had an unhindered view of his face. I shrunk completely out of sight behind Harry before the girded man turned to look our way. His features were familiar but I couldn't be sure. He extended a walking stick to aid his progress.

That brought the blinding recognition smashing at my senses. He was the man who had struck Paul!

I seized the back of Harry's shirt in my fists and silently willed him to remain quiet in front of me. Harry's forearm went up as if in recognition of my silent request, simultaneously saluting the advancing man who quickly disappeared beyond the huts we had passed.

Harry watched him, with memorizing eyes until he disappeared. He took my arm and we hastened to our stone hut. Once inside he grasped my arms and looked into my face.

"That was him, wasn't it?" he asked.

At my nod, he continued, "I knew it. The minute you grabbed my shirt, I knew it! Tina, I've seen him several times. He's been here in the village all the time."

"He was talking to Paul." I accused. I was so certain of Paul's voice.

"You saw Paul?" Kay asked. She rushed to me. The Sherpa couple rose with curiosity.

"No. Tina identified the man who knocked him out. And her, too, probably."

Kay was not convinced that Paul was in the village. He would contact them if he was. We spent the time until our meal was ready, discussing and discarding my insistence of his presence.

I was vaguely aware of plans to protect me but my heart wasn't concerned with my safety. Paul was alive! That sent conflicting shivers of hope and despair through my senses. I wanted to be an elated lover. I drove my spread fingers through my uncombed hair in desperate frustration.

Paul remained behind a mysterious series of consequences with the discipline of a master conductor orchestrating a complex symphony. The fact that he was responsible for attacks by men who tried to pack me up like a base fiddle and deliver me to some dreadful wife beater scared me witless.

I loved Paul but he couldn't be trusted with my safety. How could I ever trust him with my heart? I searched without hope for an answer to my dilemma.

Wouldn't it be wiser to walk up to the man and let him see for himself I wasn't the woman he wanted?

When I posed that question to the group gathered around a glowing brazier, Harry snorted. "Fat chance of that. Men that were promised money to deliver Tickpay won't let you take their prize away."

"And now Paul has joined them," I stated bluntly.

"I don't believe that," Harry said. "We expected a Tickpay double in Kathmandu would divert the attention away from the real Tickpay. It worked. She got away."

"I should never have urged you to wear the Sherpani outfit to the market, Tina," Kay defended. "Paul's flair for drama backfired on him. He thought the chase was over after the Sherpa meeting in Kathmandu."

I'd been lulled into believing in Paul's innocence when my emotions ran so deep toward him no matter how cynical and arrogant he seemed. A protective rage boiled deep inside when I thought of his deception, making it impossible to excuse him for siding with the enemy.

How appalling to be faced with evidence that he was on their side all the time!