

CHAPTER TEN

No Time For Yaks

I looked once more at the place I'd spent the greatest length of time during my vacation. That word--vacation--could no more describe the past two weeks of my life than the word shoe could describe a hike. Ambivalent feelings fought within my mind to describe my stay.

The village huts huddled back against the hillside behind the trail which was merely a flat strip of packed clay and stones between the huts and the edge of the mountain. The path itself was just wide enough to allow for passing Sherpas, porters, and yaks with their ever present burdens.

The trail followed the lower edge of the village, winding from the open curved area where I was found on the yak, past half a dozen houses where it then turned and cut into a gravelly slope, too steep for building when the village was first settled.

The slope above was riddled with crevices and notches that nurtured seeds long enough to take root and grow into sturdy trees and bushes to shelter the much-used trail.

On the downward side, a slope did not exist. The mountain side was vertical, dropping straight down thousands of feet. Burdened animals, yaks and people alike, walked with care along the precarious edge. The trail changed beyond the village.

The open trail didn't become wider, it simply cut through terrain that provided a wider shoulder of protection before the dangerous dropoff into the river chasm.

An open trail in Nepal is just that--open. Hiding places for surprise attacks do not exist in the dramatic way of ambushes in movies of the American West. Harry assured me I could be protected from an assailant who might jump from behind the occasional tree or clumps of bushes along the Himalayan mountain trail.

Harry's assertion brought with it a fragile feeling of security at my unbidden thought of the treachery used by the man with the unique walking stick. Foreboding settled about me like a hovering mantle. We were about to

set out on that open trail.

When we chose to walk in a group, we clustered together, two or three people within easy talking distance. There was little opportunity for our group to walk side by side on the trail that stretched before us. In days past, our small clusters spread apart as much as one hundred yards or more.

Before we packed this morning, Lohloh stressed the need to maintain a shorter distance between us from now on. Even the porters were not to go too far ahead. My protection was more important than speed.

Sunny checked the security of the burdens secured to her yaks while the porters and cooks loaded their baskets. They nodded at the instructions given by Lohloh. Kay and I waited for Harry to join us before we could be on our way.

I searched for Harry and was relieved to see him coming from behind the hut where we had stayed. He led the yak I had ridden so unceremoniously.

"I'm taking my little pet with me," Harry announced, calmly leading the yak I had been tied to. "No one else has come to claim her."

I was not surprised. He had become quite fond of the hairy yak. I had no reason to dislike the animal but I recoiled at the memory its presence invoked. A yak is much valued and its owner would certainly try to retrieve it.

Seeing the yak suddenly reminded me of the ball of yarn the Sherpani made from its hair. It would indeed help me recall the yak ride--and a whole lot more. I hurried into the stone hut to get it.

The Sherpani kept her meager belongings neatly in their places. I knew exactly where to look for the reed basket that held a carder and spinner for her handwork. I was too intent on my mission to look about the room when I entered.

As I bent down to retrieve my yarn, my neck tingled with the awareness of someone watching me. From a footstep or rustle or puff of air, I wasn't sure, my inner consciousness informed me I was not alone.

It was not an expected noise, although I hoped it was the Sherpani. I turned to express my pleasure for the yarn.

It was not the Sherpani, but Paul, who stepped from the shadowed corner.

I froze, totally devoid of words or action--absolutely suspended in space and matter at seeing the unexpected apparition.

No, it was not an apparition, there is no such thing as a ghost. It was Paul, alive, tall and strong.

A flush of heated emotion poured through me with the pleasure of seeing him before me. But his cool arrogance still brought up my defenses and summoned a measure of distrust.

The pleasure of his appearance instantly was held hostage by a flash of memory of his talk with my abductors. In a split second all the evidence and suspicions battled through my mind. He was not the honorable knight of my fantasy. I could not defend his actions any longer. I chose to believe him guilty of my kidnapping.

In my swelling heart all the facts ceased to matter. Good or bad, right or wrong, I loved him. I could not deny it. I did not want to.

His head undamaged, his tall lean body vibrantly alive, his bright blue down jacket vivid with insets of white strips, his total image expressed a vital portrait of a virile male.

An extraordinary burst of love flushed through me like the force of champagne with the cork released.

The effervescence of unfettered joy exploded within me and I whispered in reverent awe, "You really are alive."

"Of course, I'm alive," he said, looking at me with a puzzled frown.

Every single atom in my being poised to fling my body toward his arms. I stood suspended, waiting for the invitation that did not come.

"Tickpay's husband wants to see you," he said urgently. "Come. We must hurry. He won't wait long."

Paul turned his palm up to me and I grasped his hand. Or it grasped me, like the web of a predatory spider, it took me in and I cared not about the outcome.

"Is he here?" I fuzzily remembered that Harry said I must return to Kathmandu to find the husband and prove I was an imposter he would not want.

"In the trees," Paul admitted, pulling me with urgency. "We've got to get there before his man comes back."

"His man?" I queried densely.

"Nemdaab," Paul said, "That's the man with the carved walking stick. He was going to take you back to Kathmandu for the reward."

Too much too fast, I thought, not understanding what was happening. Where was Paul taking me? Was he leading me into a new danger?

It didn't matter. I could meet the horrible husband who caused my terrible adventure and I could clear up the confusion. I would give him the necklace and put my life back in order.

"Where have you been?" I asked, breathlessly, "Why didn't you tell us you were all right?"

Paul didn't stop to answer. He pulled me onward past the rear of the huts through the shadows toward the trees at the edge of the village.

When we came out on the open trail, an underlying dread brought my

nerves to a precipitous brink. Paul was wary, his glance darting in search of someone.

I didn't look for anyone else, I bristled even as I thrilled at the figure of Paul unharmed. I studied him unashamed. His chiseled features held a triumph of sorts, his carved jaw emphasized the determination in his eyes. My heart pounded waiting for some endearing phrase.

Paul was intent on following his plan. I followed his gaze to the forest.

"Who are you looking for?" I asked, when Paul looked my way.

"Tickpay's husband, Kalle Laang. He came to find one of his thugs." He looked at me, eyes narrowed, brow furrowed, trying to measure something about me. I couldn't shut off my loving, my eyes enraptured by his presense. His gaze fastened on the trees beside the trail.

A branch snapped, then movement in my peripheral vision frightened me and I surged forward to cling to Paul for protection.

It was Nemdaab who appeared between the trees, glancing behind him as if he were a racer about to cross a finish line, double checking to make sure the second place winner wouldn't beat him to the line. He was hurrying erratically, throwing a fearful look over his shoulder with each passing tree. He swam from tree to tree, his unique walking stick abandoned somewhere along the way.

Unmindful of the precipitous slope below the trees, Nemdaab flung himself toward me. He grabbed for me with the desperation of a life-time loser making the final attempt to reach the ultimate prize.

Paul jerked me out of reach. Enemy fingers scraped my jacket and Nemdaab stumbled with a heinous leer on his face.

His foreign words I couldn't understand, but his tone and manner were full of angry ejaculations that reeked of profanity.

Another man appeared behind him in a crazed frenzy--a hard vicious man I had never seen before.

"Kalle!" Paul shouted, but the man never faltered.

He piled upon Nemdaab and they wrestled to the ground. Fists pummeled. The angry men grunted at each other as they clutched and pounded and rolled in furious combat.

Paul pulled me out of range of the flailing bodies and thrust me behind him. He went forward to separate them, holding his hands aloft in readiness, awaiting an opening to interfere.

The trail was level but not wide enough for a boxing ring and not restricted by ropes in a fair match. The edge fell away plunging almost straight down for an easy thousand feet.

I crushed my fist to my mouth, horrified at the combating figures

grappling on the trail.

The tangled bodies levered themselves up, one against the other, shoving apart for a brief assessment. They postured for an electrifying moment.

Paul moved to step between them. Nemdaab and Kalle were close to the edge. Paul waited, body tensed. He seemed unaware of the hazard of the trail's edge.

I couldn't bear for Paul to interfere and be sent to his death in the deep gorge. I reached for his sleeve in terror of his being thrown off the trail.

Paul jerked impatiently to seize an opening between one madman in lethal anger pummeling another in deadly fear.

Nemdaab poised, arms wide, for a swing and Kalle lunged at the opening, his head aimed for Nemdaab's stomach. He hit the mark but with more dire consequences than he intended.

The weight of the charge carried the bodies out into open space above the precipice. For a paralyzing instant they remained suspended, ironically clutching at each other in mutual terror.

When they dropped, their screams held a nightmare quality that dwindled for a thousand feet, fading out completely in the still mountain air.

I shuddered, putting my hands over my face. Time stood still, letting the finality of the scene seep into my consciousness. What a grizzly end!

I clung to Paul, weak and shaking. He rocked me with a rare sweet gentleness while he stroked my hair tenderly. I struggled for the strength to stand and face the finale of a nightmare.

"It's all over, my tiny darling. It's all over now."

All his words did not register on my paralyzed mind. I slumped with the relief of having the horror and suspense all over. I desperately needed the comforting shelter of Paul's arms while the terrorizing scenes replayed in my mind. The necklace was the most tangible evidence that was left. My hands clutched it.

"I want this necklace returned to Tickpay," I said.

"That isn't necessary," Paul remarked. "Tickpay would have paid much more, if necessary, to be free. Now, with the death of her husband..." The sentence was left unfinished. I was left to stand alone.

Paul quickly resumed command of the trek. He sent a porter to Khumbjung reporting the accident so the authorities could be informed. He sent Lohloh down into the gorge to guard the bodies until the park police came.

I sat against a tree waiting for Paul to reorganize our trek. Conditions were slowly being brought back to normal. The angry men, the fight, and the outcome were busily discussed among the porters. Speculation and repugnance threaded their emotional conversation. Very little grief was

expressed over the lost lives.

The menacing Nemdaab was eliminated. Now what? Questions flitted through my mind. There was still much I did not understand.

"Why the fight?" I asked. "What was that really about?"

"Nemdaab was the thug sent to capture you," Paul explained. "When Kalle Laang learned that Tickpay was safely out of Nepal, he flew into an angry rage at Nemdaab for letting Tickpay slip through his fingers by wasting time with an imposter. Kalle paid a great deal of money to have his wife returned to him. He expected to get his money's worth."

"I've never seen anyone in such a rage," I said, shaking my head in total amazement.

"Kalle lost face when his wife eluded him. He was a very sick man." Paul said, as if that explained it all.

That episode was closed. Other, more personal, issues loomed before me. I had to settle other doubts.

"Where were you all the time I was recovering in the village?" I asked.

"I had a slight concussion to recover from as well," he reminded me in dismay that he had suffered, too.

"I know that. I saw the carved stick hit you," I said, recalling it vividly along with the horror that he was dead.

"I was left on the trail when the yak took off with you," Paul said. He paused, dropped his gaze and raked his fingers through his hair. He looked out across the empty space above the gorge.

"I'm not sure how I escaped," I admitted, but I was very lucky.

"Harry said he heard a scream and saw the bucking yak," Paul explained with consternation. "I should have protected you...."

He looked down at me with a devastated look, some unexplained battle going on in his mind. His tone was full of regret but I wasn't convinced. My anguish over what I thought was his death could have been prevented. I suppose I had no right to dwell on that but I still wasn't ready to completely trust him.

"You could have let us know you were all right," I said, turning my back. I walked away before I gave in to his charm. I had to work through the mixed up events before I could accept his easy explanation.

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"We interrupt this program to bring you a bulletin from a Khumbu hospital: Kalle Laang, a wealthy merchant residing in the Jiri valley was found dead on the rocky slope in the Dudh Kosi gorge. Circumstances surrounding his death

were not revealed."

Tickpay turned off the short wave radio and rubbed her stomach. A regretful expression fled across her features.

She squared her shoulders and smiled. It was a thin smile, devoid of pleasure or guile--merely an expression of relief.

No longer was it necessary to flee. Her uncle would come for her when the required legalities were completed. She could return to Nepal before her time was up.

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Our trek continued but the terror was gone. The threat on my life was over. A brooding silence settled on me as we hiked.

I trudged on, knowing that I had a few short days left in Nepal. I hoped the next few days would be totally lacking in adventure. The day proceeded uneventfully and it did appear as if my life had settled down to let me be a simple tourist after all.

Paul took the necklace as I requested and went off to see that it was returned to Tickpay's family. I expected him to meet us when we arrived in Namche.

I was nearly asleep in my tent listening to the men discussing the events with a jug of chang. I'd had a cup but the alcoholic content was too much for my head at that altitude and I couldn't stay up with the others.

The voices got louder and it seemed a more serious conversation took place. I stirred to find a more comfortable position for my hips against the hard ground and settled back into half sleep, waiting for everyone to go to bed.

The sudden *zzzzzzzzzzzz* of the tent zipper broke the silence and alerted me that the group was finally turning in to sleep.

"Kay, is that you?" I felt sleepily foolish to think it wasn't.

"No. She's sleeping in another tent."

"Paul!" I sat upright, my bag cocooning my body. I held my breath. He didn't offer an explanation. He calmly zipped the tent closed. I heard the pad sliding in place and his bag being arranged beside mine.

"What do you think you're doing?" I finally found the breath to ask.

"Getting comfortable," he answered. "I thought I'd share your tent so we could talk."

"I have nothing to say." I clutched my knees as best I could in the confining bag. Sitting upright on that tent floor wrapped in a mummy bag wasn't easy.

"Well, I have plenty to say," he insisted. There was more rustling of cloth

and soft thudding as his body slipped into the bag.

"What if I don't want to hear it?" I stared at the spot where his voice originated, valiantly trying to make out his face in the dark.

It was a hopeless exercise. The tent walls were impenetrable by rain, wind and light, although not one of those elements was around so I could prove it. As I glared at him my eyes did become more accustomed to the dark.

"Cover your ears if you want to, but I'm going to talk." His voice was low and the tone was very, very serious. He began to reiterate the entire adventure and I tried to shut it out. Bits and pieces of his explanation made sense.

In the airport he had been certain that I could replace Tickpay for one appearance to assure her escape. The buffalo herder became involved solely to steal the necklace for its monetary value. My injury from the buffalo hooves was purely accidental. The kidnapping in Namche was completely unexpected. By that time Tickpay was far away.

Paul was convincing me of his innocence.

Nemdaab took him by surprise and I couldn't see how he could have foreseen the assault.

A feeling of guilt crept up the back of my neck. I wanted to hold Paul blameless at every turn.

"You seemed innocent enough," I admitted, finally breaking my silence. "I was almost convinced until Nemdaab came by with the yaks. The attack went off so smoothly, I thought you must have planned it."

"My God, I was knocked out."

"When Lohloh and Harry found the place of the skirmish, there was no sign of you. When your body wasn't where it had fallen I thought the hit had been contrived. You didn't look blameless to me."

"I was unconscious. I couldn't do anything until my head healed."

"I thought you were dead when Harry couldn't find you. Then when you showed up with the man who had that strange walking stick, you looked like you were part of their frightening gang."

I didn't mention how I mourned the loss of a lover.

"I was nursed by some Sherpa friends. They saw the herd of strange yaks and the men who brought them. "

"You didn't think it important to let me know you were alive," I said, angering more as I thought of it.

"I explained that." His voice was firmer with slight impatience. "I had to find the assailants and straighten the whole mess out," he said. A thread of hopelessness filled his voice.

"Harry was parading me around the village as so much bait to catch your killer," I accused, indignation adding strength to my voice. I felt his hand

lightly on my shoulder.

"Can you forgive me for all I've put you through?" he pleaded.

I was completely confused. I was safe so I supposed I could forgive him that. Forgetting how he'd manipulated me wasn't going to be so easy. Forgetting that I was fooled because I fell for his charm, would be impossible.

"So much happened beyond my control," he said.

"You can say that again." I'd just gone over the pitfalls in my own mind.

"You did have me masquerade as Tickpay without my knowing," I accused, not fully understanding what his explanation was leading to.

"It seemed like such an innocent thing--a simple masquerade--to save a life," he said, quietly. "I didn't realize just how sick her husband was."

I was beginning to soften at the tone of his voice. Even in the dark I could see his dark brows and the clean cut of his powerful features. His hands were on my shoulders, reaching gently, almost imperceptibly, for my understanding. I could feel the pent up energy of his fingers through the insulation of my sleeping bag.

"I didn't realize when I saw you I would fall in love with you before it was over," he said, huskily. The wonder of his realization floated in the still air. For a long electric moment I held my breath.

"You what?" I must have dreamed his words, I'd wanted so much to hear them. My hands flung out in the darkness. He caught one and held it in both of his. He was so close to me I could feel his breath against my face.

"I wasn't going to love you. I tried not to." My hand was pressed against his lips. He held it with the reverence of a precious gift.

"You're in love with me?" I repeated his words to bring them out of the dream state I was afraid they were coming from.

"That's what I said. I love you," he repeated, "and Kay says you're in love with me." There was just a touch of unbelief in the last words.

"How can that be?" I moaned softly.

"That's what I said. How can Tina love me?"

I thought he was talking nonsense.

"You've been so..." Now that the opportunity was there I didn't have the words to explain how cold and aloof he seemed.

"Afraid...so afraid to touch you," he finished my sentence his own way and added, "Afraid you wouldn't help Tickpay escape. Afraid I wasn't man enough to protect you. Afraid you hated me for putting you in danger."

The notions he'd put into words were so poetic my heart sang. I simply clung to his hand.

A question flicked across his brow in a frown for an instant and then his eyes clung to mine overflowing with raw desire so blatant I could feel it in the

darkness.

He spread his arms to me in a glorious welcome. I flew into his embrace like a spark to rubbed cloth, without knowing I could move so quickly. The top of my bulky sleeping bag fell away from my body.

I found myself wrapped once more in the strength and protection I thought I'd lost. He kissed me thoroughly while his hands roamed sensuously up and down my back and across my shoulders.

"I saw that man hit you with the walking stick," I insisted, running my fingers over the back of his head to heal the place where the blow had struck.

"He hit me all right but just to get me out of the way so he could capture you," Paul explained. "I was only in his way."

"His yak didn't cooperate with him," I said, grinning against his neck, "because Harry caught it carrying me off." I stroked Paul's hair tenderly, so unbearably stirred by his confession.

I held his face in my hands overwhelmed by a tumult of emotions. Paul's gray eyes were dark with a longing so intense his voice became muffled and husky.

"We'll have a lifetime for loving, my tiny one," he murmured, pausing for quick kisses between words.

Paul couldn't say how the buffalo herder had found Kalle Laang's hired thug, Nemdaab, who used his unusual walking stick on our skulls.

Paul rubbed my back and moved his warm fingers provocatively up my arms. Tremors started in my midsection and I quivered.

My heart wouldn't allow this separation to go on much longer. I reached to thread my fingers through his honey brown hair, so thick and silky to my touch.

I pulled him gently toward me and he did not resist. His lips planted loving kisses over my forehead, eyes, cheeks and throat, whispering endearing sounds, primitively provocative. Desire burned from my thighs to the top of my head.

Paul's thoughts still spun through the past harrowing experience, spilling words to fill the electric silence, wanting to have the entire episode spread out and thoroughly aired so it would never come between us again.

"I wanted to shake you when you came into the hut and spoiled my stakeout. I expected you to be out on the trail."

This sounded like something he would never let me forget if we lived to be a hundred. That amount of time would be enough to do a lot of loving. Thinking over the possibility curled my toes.

"What stakeout?" I had no idea what he was talking about.

"Nemdaab was to meet me at the edge of the village and I had Kalle

Laang primed to come with me and see for himself who you really were."

"How was I to know? You let us think you were dead." I had no clue until he showed up in the hut.

"I did no such thing. Must I keep explaining myself? I dragged myself off to stay alive long enough to figure a way to stop the madness. Kalle Laang showed up and when he found out his thug was trailing the wrong woman he went into a crazed frenzy and changed everything." Paul's fingers fumbled for my zipper pull. I caught his hand before it started down.

"Are you sure Tickpay is all right?" I wanted her life to improve after what I'd been through.

"Tickpay's life will be much better." He pulled his hand away in a reaching gesture. "Her father sent you something." Paul ruffled through some supplies at the top of his bag and searched again for my hand.

He placed the oval turquoise stone in my palm. I could picture it clearly in the dark. I closed my fingers around it and found the crack was filled.

"It's been patched," I gasped, "Are you sure I should keep it?"

"It's Tickpay's wish. I think she would have been satisfied if you had kept the entire necklace," Paul whispered, leaning over to kiss the back of my hand.

"I've talked enough...except for one last question..." His breath was seductively warm on my face. His voice was barely audible. "Will you let me love you for the rest of our lives, love you properly, that is?"

I unzipped my bag in one long sweep and tucked the turquoise into my boot so it wouldn't be misplaced. My silk lined woolen pajamas were stripped and left behind. I wanted no encumbering material to thwart my answer or answers, as the case may be.