

CHAPTER FIVE

Don't Yak At Me

Paul didn't speak to me after he tended to my ankle but he was not as immune to my presence as he let on. I looked up at him from my place on the ground to find his thoughtful gaze fastened on me in introspection and I was warmed by it. When I caught him wondering, which did not happen often, he focussed quickly on some necessary task among the hikers or Sherpas.

I stood and returned my cup to the cooks. I saw Paul step beside the rushing water to gaze at the moss covered shelter on the edge of the river. I was filled with curiosity about the structure and moved to his side.

He avoided my eyes by looking at my injured leg then back to the moss covered shelter, asking, "How's your ankle holding up?"

"Fine," I said. I was determined to manage. I'd had muscles pulled during previous hikes and recovered while hiking. This was a more rigorous hike but my bruised muscle was no longer swollen and I was encouraged. My body wasn't my immediate interest. I sensed Paul wasn't anxious to continue our conversation on a personal vein. Nor was I so I asked about the cylinders of wood and tin spinning in the stream.

"These are prayer wheels and the bright painted symbols are supplications that Buddhists believe are sent to heaven as the water turns the cylinders in a clockwise direction," he answered.

Similar wheels I saw in shrines in Kathmandu were spun by people who passed by and the prayers benefitted the ones who spun the wheels.

"In this rushing water the turning of the wheel represents the cycle of life and death," he continued. The crude connections of wood against metal squeaked under the push of rushing water. The action seemed so primitive yet so filled with promise it seemed a pity it was put to what seemed to me such a frivolous use among a people deprived of many necessities.

"Why couldn't the water push generators to electricity for these people?" I asked.

"Someday that might happen," Paul assured me, "but it will put gentle lives in jeopardy and I'm not sure this fragile environment could survive that. Up the trail you'll see how nature treats the land." He turned with the signal it was time to go on.

The rest plus the tea and biscuits revived me. I was ready for the final part of the hike that would take us to our first night's camp. We left the cooks to pack their utensils and the remnants of our tea.

Paul engaged Harry in conversation as they led the way. Their words

were punctuated by their animated hands as they walked along. I couldn't hear what they discussed but they didn't appear to be in complete agreement.

Kay and I were left to reminisce. We brought up the rear of the line. The cooks, although left behind twenty minutes ago, caught up and passed us with wide grins. The porters with our tents and other supplies were far ahead, setting up camp for the night.

The trail was relatively level, giving my legs practice for the rigors of the days ahead. I needed to slowly break into an all day walk. That was something I hadn't done for months. I favored my injury, bending my ankle as little as possible. Downhill I succeeded, uphill I had to bend it mercilessly until I learned to turn my knee to the side and swing my foot forward.

Eventually that took its toll on my knee. My muscles wouldn't put up with the unusual stress very long. I didn't want to embarrass myself showing weakness in front of Paul.

A mound of flat stones split the trail. Paul called it a mani wall. Heavy stone slabs were stacked on edge, one against another, at the base of the mound. A second row was stacked in the same manner. A similar symbol was repeated on every slab. The duplicate carvings fascinated me.

"What does that curvy sanskrit lettering mean?"

"Those Tibetan letters spell out 'Hail to the jewel of the Lotus,' a prayer to the spiritual leader."

"The Guru Rimpoche was said to be born of a lotus flower in the middle of a lake," Kay added.

"Who carved them? Monks?" Those were stones, and lots of them. That pile represented long hours of tedious work.

"Usually wealthy people hire stone carvers. Each stone is a prayer and a mark of devotion," Paul said.

I stepped to go around it on the right but Paul stopped me. His arm firmly draped across my shoulder and pulled me around, aiming me to the path on the left. I caught my breath entirely pleased with the intimate gesture.

"In respect of Buddhist beliefs, and to gain religious merit, we always stay to the left of mani stones," Paul explained. His chin came down in a confidential tilt close to my ear and sent my blood racing. I shouldn't think such foolish fancies. He only wanted to make sure I didn't offend the religious.

The mani wall was over twenty feet long and Paul held me firmly by my shoulders while we walked the entire distance. I wasn't sure if his embrace implied that I was incapable of walking properly or if that was his way of refusing more inquiries. Why was I being so defensive?

I wanted his admiration and approval too much, I thought. I brought myself up short. Pay attention to the trek. That will be safer--at least for your heart, I kept telling myself.

Our footsteps and voices of those closeby were the only sounds I heard. And they were barely audible over the beating of my wayward heart. In the

open mountain terrain sound did not carry. The distance across the deep gorges was simply too far to catch the sound waves and reflect them back.

The trail wound gently upward through a brushy area where tree roots held a death grip in the rocky soil. Roots were deep and strong to hold the plants in place.

Sheer cliffs and sharp peaks were silhouetted against a sapphire sky. Thousands of feet of rock had worn off as sand and boulders, sliding down to form the rugged mountain shoulders.

"The mountains resulted from erosion, you know--wind, rain, and snow," Paul said, tipping his head down to look into my face.

Did the man read my mind? He seemed to do that before. I'd better be careful of my thoughts. I stared across the valley. The whole idea of the slow transformation from rock to sand was incredible.

"Don't look so skeptical, Tina. It took glaciers millions of years to hone those mountains." He flung an open palm upward to the fine peaks above us. I guessed my thoughts were safe after all.

Suddenly we were alert to a calamity that loomed ahead when cries of alarm broke the silence. Slowly making our way forward, we craned our heads around the curve in the trail to identify the disaster before actually running headlong into it.

Harry's loud voice cautioned that a yak had gone berserk and we should proceed with caution.

"Do we have to proceed at all?" I questioned the sense of it. The docile zums had a quieting effect when they passed me earlier but 'a yak gone berserk' reminded me of the kick from the water buffalo that left me limping.

'A yak gone berserk' were the very words passed to us from the folks ahead. I wanted to escape.

I searched for a tree I could climb or a tall boulder that would put me above the calamity. I had no trouble envisioning my body being tossed into the bottomless valley on the horns of 'a yak gone berserk.'

The trail widened and clusters of trees were on both sides. They were out of reach and too spindly and limbless to climb. The alternative was to turn and run.

Paul prevented me from retreating down the trail. He showed a calmness and restraint that made me question his intelligence.

I had no choice but to move ahead. If I didn't, I expected to be prodded as if I were a shiftless zum.

I froze when a snorting beast came bucking and stomping around the corner on the trail not fifty feet ahead, kicking dust and rocks in all directions. It fought against a heavy rope that encircled the base of its upward curling horns, a marked characteristic of the notorious species.

Paul grabbed me by my waist and with a running stride, drove us a few feet above the trail to clutch a branch of sturdy brush. I clung to him and

pushed a heel hold into the gravelly bank. Fear alone glued me to the precarious slope.

"He's not going to attack us," Paul assured me, although I doubted him in speechless terror. The maddened animal was bouncing and jerking its way toward us. I watched helplessly.

The end of the rope dragged--at a backward slant--a thin Nepalese man who calculated with hopeful eyes the distance to the trees. His muscles bulged like wires along his arms and his heels valiantly sought leverage with which to stop the rollicking beast. His weight at the end of the rope did little but raise the ire of the hairy yak.

The horned delinquent stiffened its legs and swung its head back and forth in a futile effort to free itself from bondage. In a sideways lunge the rope slackened. The man flung himself behind a tree, and with his forward momentum anchored the rope to stop the yak's forward progress.

Pausing in its fit of rage, the yak sized up the tree as an opponent it could dominate. The yak confidently lowered its head, pointing the sharp horns at the tree. With a rumbling bellow, it began moving forward. The man responded by expertly slipping the loosened rope around the tree, frantically shortening the leash with every step of the advancing beast. Neither the man nor beast relaxed but the violent action of the drama stopped when the bony protrusion between the yak's horns lay wedged against the solid tree.

Subdued at last, the big hairy animal lay heaving in the path. Its tongue lolled limply from the side of its mouth and, from its imprisoning tether, it watched us with wild eyes, turned half white in their sockets.

Paul parted the bushes below the trail and carefully picked a new path around the wild-eyed yak. I was relieved to discover I wasn't the only one seeking safe passage around the quivering mound of rare stew meat.

Clutching a sturdy bush I followed in Paul's footsteps and managed to move my feet along the steep angle of the mountain. From precarious footholds I cautiously grabbed the next bush and worked my way around the part of the trail blocked by a thousand pounds of restrained yak.

As soon as I could pull myself on the trail I hurried forward to be among the others. I nervously asked if that beast was destined for the butcher shop.

"Maybe," Paul answered, thoughtfully, "but it depends on what made him unmanageable."

"What makes you so sure he's unmanageable," quipped Harry. "The animal just hasn't been taught how to behave on the trail. That doesn't mean it couldn't learn. It'd be a damned shame to waste that muscle in a few days' worth of stew."

I was amazed to hear so many words from Harry--and such emotional ones at that. Those few sentences amounted to a full page monologue for him. I trudged on thoughtfully.

As the terrain flattened, tall bushes lined the trail and fields of potatoes

and cabbage became more frequent. I marveled at the simple fences farmers made from long thin branches of bushes woven together.

The continuous tedious pace took its toll on my ankle. A throb developed and I hoped the end of today's trek wasn't too far away.

Paul dogged my footsteps forcing me onward when I thought I could go no further. When he was satisfied I could keep up he strode ahead to talk to the others.

Turning my thoughts away from myself to the more important idea of self preservation made me put my aching muscles aside. I was determined to make it after all.

I almost forgot my sore ankle as I was struck anew with awe as different perspectives of snow covered peaks came into view at each bend in the trail.

By the time we arrived at our evening campsite, tents were erected, making a comfortable home. The kettle boiled on the fire and we were handed the cup of tea that preceded every meal. I collapsed on the ground in a tired and dazed state. Although no one else in our group complained of being tired, I noticed they showed the same appreciation for a space on the ground as I did.

The cooks were preparing the evening meal while porters erected a large community tent for our dining where we could gather out of the wind. The camp was peaceful and sheltered by a steep hillside dotted with clumps of brush. The well-traveled trail cuddled against the hill and separated our tents from an occasional tumbling rock. Sherpas who passed showed a mild interest in our camp, greeting our porters by name. Several tourists stopped to chat with Paul about accommodations they could expect farther up the trail.

I watched Sunny bring hay for the yaks. She had fed them grain before we arrived and brought them water. They were given the potato peelings and other vegetable scraps, swimming in the water in which they were washed. I wandered over to Sunny and chatted while she bedded the animals down near a clump of trees beyond our tents.

The porters huddled in thin blankets. Bare feet and hands were oblivious to the cold. I offered my gloves to one porter but he pulled his own from his pocket and grinned as he shrugged his shoulders at my offering. I slipped my gloves gratefully onto my hands. I wanted them more than he did.

Paul smiled at my action. His arm circled my shoulders in a confiding gesture. "This is their environment, Tiny. They grew up without heat, shoes, and gloves. At their campfires they laugh at our weakness."

The once-hated nickname had taken on a form of endearment when Paul used it. At his slightest touch I wanted to believe Paul held some romantic interest in me. I turned carefully in Paul's arm to look into his face.

"Do they really?" I asked, wondering how long I could pretend an interest in the Sherpas with my pulse skittering all over the place.

"You'll admit we bundle up a lot," he said. "Sometimes it's a wonder we don't overheat."

"I did feel a little sweaty a while back, but standing around I'm getting chilled," I said as I made a timid little shudder.

He opened his jacket and pulled me inside. "Let's go over by the fire," he said, "We can't let the Sherpa's think we're getting tough."

I understood and let them be amused, while I warmed on the inside from this devastating man's embrace.

Our cooks prepared our evening stew from vegetables and meat carried on the backs of the Sherpas. The welcome concoction was flavored with onions and garlic to suit our tastes, which Paul was expert at determining before we started out.

The porters made themselves comfortable by cutting small nest-like clearings in the brush. They sat on the soft springy branches and cooked their evening meal over generous fires. With two curved fingers, they scooped rice and vegetables from shallow bowls into their mouths. Apart from us, they amused themselves with gambling or singing. The loud laughter and gossip continued long into the night.

My body was racked with fatigue and Kay admitted to being weary so we found our tent. I wiggled into my sleeping bag to find a comfortable position while my mind filled with visions of Paul. He fit into every facet of my life with ease. I cuddled deeper into my sleeping bag and drifted into fantasy dreams. Paul had tucked me into his jacket so lovingly when he thought I'd taken a chill. His smiles filled my closed eyelids. I filled my dreams with impossible fantasies.

I was carried up to hard masculine lips. I leaned into a kiss. The lips smiled and the friendly grin mocked me. Then eyes--gray eyes--watched me with a speculative expression. Gray eyes turned dark, almost black, and filled with recognition. They faded into honey brown and I walked around white eyed yaks, up and down stony paths and floated over terraced fields and snowy mountain peaks.

How I could wake the next morning feeling as rested as I did, I can't explain.

The porter greeted me with a pan of warm water for washing. The chilly air flooded the tent when I took in the washwater. I slipped into jeans and a knitted shirt.

I climbed outside the tent to find a glorious morning. I had to look almost straight up to see the sky. Moving my neck around was the easiest way I could search for Paul without making a point of it. He was busy with Lohloh and Sunny, talking over the plans for the day.

The sky glowed in the early morning light. The greater part of the sky was hidden by the steep hill behind us and the eroded mountainsides climbing to the heavens on the far side of the valley. Speckles of fair weather clouds promised another good day for hiking.

After breakfast Paul came to me while I drank a last cup of tea. He

spoke of the rigorous day ahead and gave me encouragement. I had the feeling what he said wasn't as important as the excuse it provided to talk with me. I gave him my wide-eyed attention when he spoke.

"This will be the steepest climb on our trek, Tiny. The trail crosses the Dudh Kosi river from side to side through forests of blue pine, silver fir and juniper. The uphill grade isn't bad there. But once we're past the Bhote Kosi river, we'll have a steep thousand foot climb to Namche."

I put a quarter mile of flat highway on end and shuddered at the sight.

Paul laughed, "Make that a mile of rumpled ribbon and you've got a more accurate picture."

Even with Paul's remarkable description of the trail, I was totally unprepared for the disastrous scene that came into view when we rounded the mountain wall and overlooked the river. The trail ended abruptly in a cliff overhanging the demolished riverbed. He stopped beside me and it was some time before I realized he was watching my breathless reaction to the scene with cool watchful eyes.

He motioned to me and we weaved our way down a hairpin trail, turning back and forth on a stony ledge. Dust kicked up by unstable footsteps choked me. Paul was at my elbow, lending support when I showed the slightest sign of faltering.

At the river there was no trail. We wound our way around massive white boulders strewn recklessly over the flat area.

The Dudh Kosi riverbed was strewn with trees and boulders torn and riddled from the rocky moraine in 1985 when an earth tremor during monsoon rains broke the barrier of glacial Lake Langboje, and released its entire contents in one giant deluge.

The water of the glacial lake, contained on a bench upstream formed in centuries past, rushed down in a devastating flood, tearing out the bridges, trail, trees, and hundreds of feet of the gravelly clay, called moraine, that formed the river banks. We made our way around the boulders to the wildly boiling stream.

Paul's gray eyes reflected the milky waters, contemplating more than what was apparent to me. "This is water from far beyond Sagarmatha," he murmured when I questioned him.

I could not understand his words over the roar of the stream. He obligingly brought his mouth close to my ear and repeated, "This water comes from Sagarmatha and beyond. It runs into the Ganges and washes millions of faithful worshippers in India."

I felt an intenseness I could not explain. I had the fleeting impression of his desire for seduction, knowing with a flash of intuition I was right. This was not time, not the place. A strange look passed across his face and was gone.

He waved me toward the roaring stream. Logs bridged the savage water and it looked like a scary crossing to me. Huge logs ingeniously formed the

bridge. Two logs were pushed out over the stream from both sides, with enormous boulders piled on the ends. Then two more logs were pushed out from the extended ends of the first logs to bridge the gap between the two sides. The ends were anchored with steel cables to the jutting logs.

Paul took my elbow and pushed me toward the bridge. "Don't look down. Just look at Kay's back and follow her across," he instructed. With a final gentle shove, he propelled me toward the logs in front of him and I had no choice but to do as he said.

The wide logs felt sturdy enough under my feet. But try as I might, I could not forget the frightening stream only a few feet below. The roar was deafening and I couldn't fool myself into ignoring the terrifying force of the plummeting water. Even with my sight riveted ahead on Kay's back, my peripheral vision magnified the power of the curling water as it pummeled and tore at the river's edge. This terrifying force of nature had formed this awesome gorge over the centuries and I refused to flaunt my passing. I moved my feet carefully but slowly and somehow managed to make my way across.

It was with a burst of joy that I found myself safely on the other side and turned to face Paul's approving grin at my pleased expression. I hurried around the bleached boulders to put a safe distance between me and the wild rusing water.

If I thought I could avoid the river after that, I was mistaken. The trail clung to the steep mountainside above the river for some time and abruptly turned to cross the deep gorge. This time I faced a cable bridge swinging more than fifty feet above the milky water. The surface was formed of planks woven together with heavy cables. A railing of heavy rope gave me something to hang on to but the long span swung and jerked with the footsteps of us all.

Prayer flags fluttered from the swaying cables, their faded messages unreadable in the sun. The thinning air and the steep ups and downs dimmed my enthusiasm by the time we stopped for lunch. My ankle wasn't throbbing but it wasn't completely comfortable either so the rest became more important than the food.

After lunch we walked steadily upward, crossing the Dudh Kosi river twice more on high frightening bridges. This part of the trek was indeed more difficult than what we experienced before.

Kay didn't offer much conversation on this part of the journey. We talked briefly between heavy breaths when we stopped to drink from our water bottles. A sip of water wet our throats parched from the exertion of breathing the thinning air.

"Do your legs hurt?" I asked. Misery loves company and I thought someone else ought to be in pain.

"Not exactly, but I am tired," she admitted.

My knees were shattered on the downhill portions where I expected some relief after the hard uphill sections. My pain oscillated from throbbing knees

when going downhill to strained lungs when going uphill.

Paul walked toward me, fresh and energetic as when we started. It had been hours since I had shown the rugged physical stamina that I thought I had when I came to Nepal. He read that thought.

"You're doing fine," he assured me.

I tossed him a tired sigh that ended in a huff of disbelief.

"Did you ever hike all day when you were home?" he asked.

"No." I said with a gasp, "and I couldn't find as many ups and downs anywhere in Minnesota as I've walked over today."

"You see what a remarkable feat you just performed?" He insisted, declining his chiseled chin with a decisive snap. He paused in his stride to add. "Namche is a little further up the hill. I'm going ahead to make sure Lohloh didn't have any problems. We'll camp there for the next two days."

With that he disappeared around the next bend in the trail.

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Watching from the second story window of the large stone house overlooking the market area in Namche, the young Sherpani surreptitiously watched the people coming up the trail from Jorsale.

A dark haired trekker was pointed out to her. How could that be the woman who had her necklace?

"Uncle, you must be mistaken. That looks like a man."

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Namche functions as the Sherpas' capital. It's perched on a promontory above the confluence of the Dudh Kosi and the Bhote Kosi, rivers that tear through gorges thousands of feet below the serene white peaks that tower miles above.

The town is horseshoe shaped with stone buildings lined up along stone streets on the terraced hillside. At the high perimeter of the city Paul pointed out the fence that marked the edge of Mount Everest National Park headquarters and museum where we would visit the next day.

The streets of Namche were packed with Sherpas, trekkers, climbers, and traders that came in from Khumbu, Tibet, Katmandu, and India for the weekly bazaar.

All the traffic, unlike Katmandu, was on foot. Not a single motorized vehicle was in sight. We found our way to the bivouac in the courtyard of an inn secluded by a stone wall with a gate that would be closed at dark.

On all sides of Namche I saw towering peaks. Paul spotted my awe toward the marvelous white spires and rewarded me with another grin. My heart flip flopped.

I could only nod my head and even then I was afraid he could hear my heart beat. I forced myself to concentrate on the scenery. I knew so few words to adequately describe the granite peaks and my reaction to their lofty stance.

He introduced me to the dramatic peaks--Teng Kangpoche, Ama Dablam, Tramserku--as if they were his personal friends.

We climbed the stairs through the dark livestock byre to the dining hall. On the right was a room lined with rough tables and benches. They were a vision of luxury--a touch of civilization I was gratified to see, no hunkering down on my sore ankle for two whole days.

No color adorned the worn wooden floors or gray stone walls. Through glassless windows on my left as I entered, I could see houses rising on the terraces above. At the end of the room I could see across the roofs of buildings close by. From the windows on my right I watched the people in the street below. They moved steadily up the rough stone steps in the wider version of the trail over which we had just come.

My eye caught a cluster of familiar figures beside a darkened door across from the gate that opened into our courtyard. I leaned to take a closer look for I knew it was not the men in our group. The ancient Sherpa was among the men gathered there.

I was surprised to think he came all the way from Kathmandu just for the bazaar but I was so pleased to see someone I knew, that I started to call out to him and wave. When I leaned toward the window I spotted several men gesturing and pointing at the gate below.

One of those men was the buffalo herder! I pulled back quickly and motioned for Kay to take a look.

It was the buffalo herder for sure. A cold chill ran down my spine. I couldn't think of a reason to be frightened but that didn't stop the ominous warning that flushed through my body.

"Why do I have the feeling I'm being followed," I demanded.

"These people move about on foot with a lot more ease than you're accustomed to. The market at Namche is visited by them regularly." Paul finally looked at me and I knew he was holding something back when he struggled for words.

"They keep an eye on every tourist. They know who we are but you're a stranger," Kay added, feeling much at ease.

"You bear a remarkable resemblance to Tickpay, the wife of a rich and prominent man in Kathmandu, Tina," Paul stated flatly.

"Am I just an object of idle curiosity, then?" I didn't quite believe it but there was a ring of innocence in his voice.

"The rich are always objects of curiosity. If people wonder what the woman's up to, they want to satisfy their curiosity." Paul stroked his chin thoughtfully. His two day beard bristled under his fingers. "They'll keep wondering."

"Then we have to set them straight, don't we? We have to tell them who I really am."

"If they've made up their minds, it won't be easy to convince them you're Tina Burrows."

He put his hands on my shoulders and held me back to get a clearer look at my face.

"I have a better idea. Why don't you dress up like Tickpay and go through the market tomorrow as if you were shopping? You do have that turquoise necklace with you, don't you?"

It was in my cosmetic case. It was a treasured gift from a Sherpa, a genuine symbol of Sherpa customs, and bonafied work of Sherpa handcraft. Its immeasurable value made me feel I belonged to the necklace as much as it belonged to me. With that, ownership took on a double dimension. Wearing it would add a third and I wasn't sure how that measured up.

"Won't impersonating this Tickpay be impossible?" I was a little frightened at the idea but intrigued as well.

"Why? If the men we suspect are curious about the well-known person, they'll be satisfied to find they were right all along." Paul waited for his meaning to sink in. He held me gently by the shoulders and looked hard at me.

"Do it, Tiny. It won't do any harm. If the lady finds out, I think she'll be amused."

"Do you know her?"

"I don't know her personally, but I know who she is." Paul removed his hands from my shoulders and I felt the withdrawal like a cold draft. I leaned forward to hold back the inevitable barrier he so quickly dropped, wanting to bring his warm strong hands back to my shoulders.

I could please Paul if I went through the charade. I remembered the time I dressed up at his suggestion in Kathmandu. The speculative way Kay observed Paul reminded me of his flair for the dramatic. In retrospect, the Sherpa dance had turned into a delightful experience.

Why couldn't this be another equally delightful experience?