

Chapter One

Welcome to Nepal

Our 2014 flight into Tribhuvan International Airport arrives about an hour late, enveloping us in darkness before Paul and I get the view of the Kathmandu Valley we crave. Ringed by snow-covered peaks, it sits northeast of India in the middle of the Himalayan mountain range. Nepal is a landlocked country that contains Mount Everest, the tallest mountain in the world.

Ancient temples and modest dwellings fill this hidden land with few roads to connect them. Not until the year I was born, 1949, did the first motorized vehicles appear. Then, whole limousines were carried over the mountains secured to long bamboo poles. They arrived as most goods did, strapped to the shoulders of porters. In 1956 a road was built linking Kathmandu to the Indian border, which accelerated trade from outside.

Tourism is Nepal's largest industry. Paul and I arrive here for a second time, not merely as tourists, but as parents visiting a son. This country has been Adam's home for the last eight years; he arrived here first to witness the political struggle, then stayed on to work in human rights. He's proud of his achievements, as are we, although they've come with a price. His commitment to living overseas has meant long separations from us, and the risk of losing touch with

an extended family back in the States.

We find the airport barely changed in seven years - still void of expensive embellishments common to more prosperous nations. Walls of bare concrete and brick shelter shopkeepers selling miniature prayer wheels and Tibetan singing bowls. We stand with others in long lines of exhausted travelers while customs and visa officials process our papers. Our bags wait for us as we enter the claim area, but local time is nearing midnight before we clear the final gate.

Kathmandu air and noise assault us as we step out the door. Cab drivers shout "taxi" and trip over each other to be first to reach us and earn our business. The night air is suffused with the dust of so many unpaved roads. It is springtime and the end of the dry season. The monsoons are coming, but we're hoping they'll hold off long enough for us to finish another trek. Looking for our son, we know he'll be here to meet us. Over the heads of shorter, darker natives, we see him waving.

This time, Adam stands strong and handsome, and towers protectively over his new wife, Amita. They make a nice-looking couple, if you don't notice the difference in their heights. Adam, at six feet, dwarfs his Nepali wife, who stands a full foot shorter. Yet I'm comforted in knowing someone else now keeps an eye on my son.

Tears don't well up when I see him. I hadn't wanted them to. Since I'm meeting his wife for the first time, I want my first impression to be strong. Hugging my son, I bravely hold my emotions in check.

Paul's hug ends in a handshake, as it often does when he greets his son. His aviation-style eyeglasses enhance a stern expression, then fall away, melting into a warm smile. Still blond, but darkening, his full head of hair makes him look younger than most men of his age. He greets Amita with a friendly confidence drawn from years of living abroad.

Amita speaks softly, "Welcome to Nepal," and lays a white silk scarf, called a *khata*, around each of our necks. Her smile stretches across a flawless caramel-colored face encompassing two sparkling brown Asian eyes. Her natural warmth casts any fears I had about meeting her off on the evening breeze.

The driver Adam hired stuffs our two suitcases into the rear of his tiny Suzuki Maruti. Not a true luggage compartment, the shallow space in the back allows no more than a foot of storage. I remembered to protect my laptop with extra padding, but hold my breath until the liftgate finally clicks into place. The driver comes around to open the rear door for us, gesturing to indicate where we should sit.

Three of us squeeze into the back seat holding our backpacks on our laps. Six-foot Adam is wedged against the far door. Amita sits in the middle with me on her other side, while Paul sits in the front passenger seat.

Just as we think this tight arrangement might work, I watch as a new passenger attempts to climb into the back seat with my son. Adam pushes back, firmly saying, "*Ka'ĩ khaali chaina!*" - There is no room for you in here!

His protest fails to discourage the extra passenger, who diverts to the front seat where he perches next to the driver, a willing accomplice in this. With the shift stick held firmly between his knees, he and the driver get the car into gear and commence driving us down the bumpy street.

Now Adam says, "We'd be a lot safer with less of a crowd in the front." He turns to his wife, urging her best Nepali diatribe.

"*Ekaichin yaã kaar thaamnuparchaand!*" she pleads. "Please stop the car!" She asks the extra passenger to climb into the back seat with us.

All is to no avail. By now, both men are satisfied. The driver has succeeded in providing free transportation for his friend, as was his original intent.

Conceding defeat, Adam quietly leans forward to instruct his father, " '*Bistaarai haãknuholaa*' means 'Please drive more slowly' and '*Hos garnu*' means 'Be careful'. They're two phrases you might find useful here."

My white-knuckled grip on the handle above my side window chooses now to loosen completely into my hand. Showing it to Adam, a nervous giggle escapes from my throat.

"Welcome to Nepal," he says, smiling.

I shrug, releasing the tension I'd felt.

"Thanks," I say. "I'd forgotten. This is all part of the Nepal experience. I should relax and go with it, or I'll be wasting my time."