

THE LOST TRAIL

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CHAPTER ONE

The head gang-man blew the whistle. Monotonous sound of the hammers stopped at once. She took the discoloured bag. The drudges made a large queue near the water drum. To avoid the queue, she went a few steps ahead at the bent of the road. A leaked pipe was oozing. She bent forward to get water. The cold water failed to soothe the palms, sore with the friction of the rough handle of the hammer daylong. At once, she perceived that she was being observed. It was Tapden, ogling at the girl with curly brown hairs. Swiftly, she adjusted her pallu that slipped off her shoulder, partially exposing the deep cleavage. Tapden, the contractor's man, came nearer, 'Don't drink this water. The pipe is leaked at several places.'

She did not reply. Tapden came closer, 'I have two eggs in my lunch box ! Take one, let's go there', he showed the deserted passenger shed a furlong ahead.

'I have *chapathi* and *aachar* ! I don't take eggs', she quickly stepped towards the gathering of the female drudges.

'What did he say ?', Vima asked.

‘Offered an egg !’

Vima made a weird farting sound with her mouth, ‘Son of a bitch ! Last Monday he molested Lakshmi. He has an eye on you, be careful’, Vima looked affectionately.

‘What ! Lakshmi should have told me !’

‘She didn’t tell anyone. She is scared. Tapden threatened her with dire consequences. She could have been raped even. By God’s grace, a few persons were passing by the hut. Sound of the footsteps diverted Tapden’s attention for a while and Lakshmi got the chance to run away !’

‘How could you know ?’

‘She was running towards chak bazaar. I saw. She was not ready to tell the story but I guessed and ultimately she confessed.’

‘But why did she go with him ?’

‘Tapden bluffed. Said that the contractor called’, Vima took a little pickle and said, ‘take it. I made it with lime.’

The shrill whistle announced the end of the time off.

‘Oh ! These fellows will not allow us to take food even !’, Vima made a grumbling sound with her nose and mouth.

They worked until the sun touched the crest of the western hills and then the hammers stopped with the long blow of the whistle. The labourers went hurriedly towards the waiting trucks. A few would go to Tashiding in the uphill and some would go to Mayong. She went for a Tashiding bound truck. It was too crowded. She looked here and there. Leaning on the contractor’s Maruti Gypsy, Tapden was smoking. He stared at her.

‘Mahi !’

She looked back towards the truck. It was Sonamla. He waved his hand, ‘Come managed a little space for you’

She kept her feet on the footboard. Sonamla held her hand and helped her to board the truck.

‘Thank you !’, she smiled. Captivated, Sonamla was looking at the bunch of golden brown hairs that covered a part of those expressive eyes.

The truck started for its destination. She gripped a rope hook on the cross member. Pushing the robust man beside him, Sonamla tried to make a little more space for her. She smiled.

‘How is your mother ?’

‘Better, I took her to the sub-centre. They advised me to take her to the primary health centre. The doctor gave medicines’

Someone within the crowd was singing *pallam samlo*. Sonamla started waving his head in the rhythm. The truck was passing through the green hills.

A small crowd gathered near a tea stall at the Tashiding bazaar. The truck passed by the crowd and stopped. Sonamla jumped on the road. He stretched his hand. She caught his palm and got down.

‘What happened there ?’, she pointed her index finger towards a roadside tea stall.

‘Let’s see, it’s Tshring’s shop !’

‘Know him ?’

‘Yes, he is my cousin ! Don’t you know him ?’, Sonamla went a few step forward.

‘No ! Never talked with him’

‘Come, Tshring is a fine man’

They went towards the shop. A group of tourists were surrounded by the local crowd. Tshring was too excited. The local people were nodding their heads in his support. A young man from among the tourists was trying to convince Tshring.

‘Hi, Tshring ! What happened ?’, Sonamla asked.

Tshring looked at him, 'You tell them Sonamla, do I sell liquor ?'

'No never ! Why ?'

'He is insisting me for liquor !', Tshring pointed to another man among the tourists.

'We are extremely sorry ! I beg your apology', the young man hold the hands of Tshring.

'You are a good man, he is not ! He told that everything is available in lieu of money ! Are we so cheap ?'

'Tshring ! I also beg your apology ! I brought them to your shop Sonamla, will you please request him ?'

Sonamla looked at Nimma. He kept his hand on Tshring's shoulder, 'Look, Nimma is also requesting ! He loves you ! Brings the tourists in your shop.'

Tshring looked at the man, standing a little away, and said, 'Don't insult us ! I told you that liquor is available at the liquor shops, I do not sell liquor. But you showed me money ! You slapped on my dignity. Money cannot purchase everything. It's my father's shop ! He advised me not to sell liquors. And you said ! Okay, you may go'

The young tourist once again apologized and the team went to Nimma's Tata Sumo. Nimma waved his hand and started the car towards Geyzing. The locals left the shop. Sonamla touched his shoulder once again and said, 'Don't get excited. There are different types of people'

Tshring smiled. He looked at Mahi.

'Oh ! I forgot to introduce Mahi !', Sonamla grinned.

'Perhaps I saw her where do you live ?'

She pointed her finger towards the uphill, 'Laso.'

'I see must have seen at the bus stoppage Come inside ! Have a cup of tea'

They entered the small tea stall decorated with coloured

papers, paper lampshades, coloured ribbons and posters of Khecheopalri Lake, Pemayangtse Monastery and a magnificent view of Kanchenjunga. She was feeling embarrassed for her muddy dress. They sat on a bench. Tshring served them tea and local bakery biscuits.

‘How long it will take to repair the road ?’, he asked.

‘Another month if there is no heavy rains’, Sonamla replied.

‘So you are safely on job for one month !’

‘Perhaps ! They will start the next phase before the winter’

‘Condition of market is too bad ! Small shop owners are scared. Even at Jorthang market I talked with a few. Sell is decreasing day by day ! Hard to survive !’

‘What about your plan to open the roadside inn ?’

‘I am still having the plan but’

‘But ?’

‘Not getting enough courage’

‘Do it we are with you !’, Sonamla looked at Mahi for her consent.

‘We ! But we have no money roadside inn needs lot of money !’, she was surprised.

‘Oh Mahi ! It will be a small inn he will require workers once it is opened. We shall work. Can’t you take charge of the kitchen ?’, Sonamla laughed.

‘Yes but !’

‘But ?’

‘His wife can manage the kitchen !’

‘That’s true ! Tshring, where is your wife ?’

‘Don’t know Never seen her !’, he looked at Mahi, ‘please bring her for me, if you find her !’

Tshring and Sonamla laughed so loudly that a few passersby looked at the tea stall. She liked the humorous man. They came out of Tshring’s shop. Raising his hand,