

At 22,000 feet in the Himalayas, a killer stalks. When an amateur climber inherits a cottage, she uncovers an ancient mystery involving her great grandfather's Mt. Everest expedition. She learns, to her peril, that some inheritances trigger a deadly avalanche of events that reverberate through time...

Strange Karma

by Willow Healy

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WILLOW HEALY

"The quality of the prose is strong throughout, with the depiction of the frozen wasteland of the Himalayas being particularly effective."

— *Kirkus Reviews*

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Chapter One

Mount Everest Base Camp, 1924

Five miles above sea level, Mount Everest rose above the Tibetan plain like a monstrous stalagmite. Surrounding her were the cloud-piercing Himalayan peaks Lhotse, Nuptse, and Pumori, and at her base lay the frozen tongue of Rongbuk Glacier. Directly below the glacier, seeming like it had been birthed by the mountain itself, stood Rongbuk Monastery, stepping up the mountain in a series of stone buildings. The monastery served as a spiritual sentinel for Buddhist monks who lived, meditated and searched for enlightenment.

The British expedition camped in the great mountain's shadow. Their canvas tents sprouted over the moraine like a field of wild mushrooms. For weeks, the men had waited for a break in the weather, waited for the opportunity to be first to climb Mount Everest. Time was running out. The monsoon was coming.

Andrew (Sandy) Irvine, at age twenty-two, was the youngest expedition member. With the high peaks looming behind him, he sat perched on an outcrop repairing the bent strut of Bentley Beetham's camera. The new Vest Pocket Model B Kodak had just been introduced. Being lightweight made it perfect for mountain climbing. He brushed back a lock of straw-colored hair and blew on his reddened, wind-chaffed hands for warmth. Sandy understood that he was the expedition's go-to-man when mechanical things needed

fixing, and he didn't mind it a bit. As he oiled and manipulated the bellow mechanism, in the distance came the welcome clank of yak bells. Bloody wonderful, he thought, supplies were here and along with the letters from Emma and his family. Emma. His beautiful, free-spirited fiancée. He'd reread each of her letters so often that they were practically in tatters. Just to see her words on the page brought back vivid memories of her love.

At the sound of boots crunching on ice, Sandy glanced up to see George Mallory approaching with his usual cat-like grace. His thick, dark hair, disheveled by the wind, stood straight up above a pair of robin's egg blue eyes. After all their months together, Sandy still felt a sense of awe in his presence. No one in England had a more dynamic style or a more intuitive understanding of rock climbing than George.

Sitting down next to Sandy, he brushed the dirt off his puttee leggings. "The supplies and mail are arriving. I'm expecting a letter from my sister, Mary, she's going to let me know the moment the monsoon hits Ceylon."

"Ceylon's thousands of miles away," Sandy exclaimed.

"True, but after leaving Ceylon, the monsoon barrels straight for us, so it'll give us some idea when to expect it here."

"If we don't summit by the end of May..." Sandy's voice trailed off with concern.

"Doesn't give us much time, does it? Probably two more weeks, maybe three, if we're lucky." Then George twisted around and studied Mount Everest as if he'd never seen it before. "Not a beautiful mountain, is it? Jagged, asymmetrical, and one deadly brute."

Sandy nodded his agreement. Deadly was right. During the 1922 Mount Everest expedition, seven porters were swept away by an avalanche and buried alive.

“I’ve come to tell you that Bruce and I will make the first summit push.”

“Jolly good. When do you go?” Sandy asked.

“Very soon, probably in a couple of days.”

“You can count on me for any support.” Sandy held up the camera he’d been fixing. “These new cameras are fragile, you should bring two along, just in case one malfunctions.”

“Excellent idea, I’ll borrow Sommerville’s.”

The bell’s clanking grew louder until the caravan, a long ribbon of men and animals came into sight, wending its way up the slope. Bataar, the leader, was out in front, followed by men and yaks. In the intense cold, vapor streaming from the animals’ noses appeared like dragon smoke. Except for the eyes and nose, every inch of a yak was covered by an extraordinary amount of shaggy hair.

Picking up the camera, Sandy started snapping pictures. “Emma’s a professional photographer and is always asking me for more photos.”

George looked interested. “You seem keen on her.”

Sandy smiled. “Very. We’re to marry.”

“Ahh, so it’s serious. Then I look forward to meeting her one day.”

“Dance at our wedding, but after I return, my expedition days are over. The danger frightens Emma too much.”

“Ruth feels the same way.” George took out his pipe, carefully cleaned out bits of charred tobacco, then packed in fresh. When he lit a match, the sharp smell of sulfur wafted up.

By now, Bataar and his men had set up a makeshift corral near the camp. Due to the steep terrain, the animals couldn't climb higher. Now it was up to the men to ferry goods to the upper camps.

"There's something mysterious about that man."

"Bataar? Why?" Sandy asked puzzled.

"Look at him. See how different he is from the others, much taller and with green eyes. Speaks Chinese, Tibetan, English, even a smattering of Latin, and who knows what else."

George gave a sigh and tamped the glowing embers of tobacco with a pipe tool. "He's leaving tomorrow, best get all our letters ready for the yak express."

After the mail was given out, Sandy rushed back to his tent, his face flush with excitement. He opened Emma's letter first and looked down at the one page in surprise. Usually, her letters consisted of at least four sheets of paper.

My Dear One,

I think of you always and miss you in ways that you can't believe. Mother was beside herself in anger when I broke off my engagement with Freddie and told her I would marry you instead. But you mustn't worry. The situation at home became so intolerable that I am moving in with Christina Broom, my lovely, kind teacher, who sends you her regards. She offered me a room in her house and a position as her photography assistant. We are constantly busy photographing, so I am making a decent wage, and besides, I have a cottage in the Lake District, which was bequeathed to me some years ago. Please be safe

and careful for my sake. I can't wait for the expedition to be over, and once again, you are in my arms. My new address in London is written on the back. I'll write more when things are calmer. All my love.

*Your,
Emma*

Sandy became crazed with worry. Emma's mother was beside herself in anger... living with Christina Broom. This hellish situation of Emma's was all due to him. From the very start, her mother had hated him. She insisted he wasn't suitable, for Sandy was neither rich nor was he titled, and Emma had offers from both. It was made clear to Sandy that he was in the way. Her family's fortunes suffered from bad investments, and their future rested on Emma marrying well.

Bubbling with agitation and helplessness, Sandy thrust the letter into his pocket and wandered over to the corral where Bataar was tending to a yak. He liked Bataar, liked his gentle dignity.

"Namaste."

"Hello, English."

Sandy lifted the lid of a can of Dunhill My Mixture 965 tobacco with his penknife and offered him some. Bataar reached into his pocket and pulled out a narrow, foot-long pipe partially covered in silver filigree and embedded with turquoise and coral. Sandy filled his Meerschaum pipe. They fell into easy conversation.

"Nice taste, English. Like the smell of old leather."

"How was your trip?" Sandy asked.

"Travelling a big danger now, many bandits and warlords. New government very weak. I afraid Russia or Japan attack us."

“Why do you believe that?”

“I see this before. It is the way of nature. We are like an injured animal.” He made a gesture with his hand slitting his throat. “Other animals will see that and hunt us.”

A man’s shadow crossed Sandy’s field of vision, and a porter with a scar traveling down his left cheek, like a puckered seam on a jacket sidled up. He opened his grimy hand and there, sparkling in the sun, were two blueberry-sized uncut red stones resting on his palm. Holding up one of the stones to give a better view, he began speaking in a wheedling tone.

Sandy couldn’t understand a word of Tibetan, but clearly, the porter wanted to sell the stones. When Bataar shook his head, the porter turned to leave.

“Wait!” Sandy insisted. “Are you sure you don’t want them?” he asked Bataar,

“No, English.”

The porter was savvy enough to know when a man was interested. Smiling at Sandy like a brush salesman, he exposed a rotting front tooth. Sandy pushed down his revulsion for the man as the stench of decay wafted up, “How much does he want?”

“This man is evil, English. He picks the bones of the weak. Best not to have these stones. There is a bad story here. I feel it.”

But Sandy visualized Emma wearing the stones and thought how beautiful they’d look against her red hair.

“What are they?”

The porter’s answer was a shrug of the shoulders and a cold stare.

“Where are they from?”

“Ama Dablam.” But there was a reluctance to the porter’s reply.

Sandy could tell the man wasn’t going to add anything more.

He counted out the agreed-upon money, more than he had intended to pay. Now to take them to Noel Odell, the expedition geologist, for his opinion. Probably just garnets, but still, they were beautiful. “Thanks, Bataar.”

Bataar’s expression turned grave. “Don’t keep them, English.” With that as a goodbye, he stooped to pick up a wooden pack-saddle, and a wool saddle blanket decorated in an orange peony design set against an indigo blue background and went to join his men.

Not surprisingly, Sandy found Noel Odell in his tent, studying a rock with a magnifying hand lens. Next to him was a small table stacked with dozens of rock specimens.

“They all look the same gray-brown to me, how can you tell the difference?”

“And I could ask how you were able to improve our oxygen bottles so that they function so much better?”

With a laugh, Sandy handed him the small red stones. “Say, Noel, be a good egg, I just bought these. Can you tell me what they are? I hope I’m not a bloody fool for having done it.”

Noel shifted the focus of his hand lens, smoothed his light brown beard and mustache, and examined each one carefully, then picked up the pocket knife that lay next to his notes. “Do you know the Mohs scale?”

“Never heard of it.”

“It’s a standardized scale of hardness to help identify minerals, developed a hundred years ago by the German geologist Fredrick Mohs. All minerals have a characteristic hardness. For example, very soft talc is rated a one, while a diamond is a ten on the other end of the scale.” Noel tried to scratch his knife blade with one of the stones.

“Wait, Noel, what are you doing?”

“This little test just told us plenty, because forged steel is a 7.5 on the scale. This stone left a scratch mark on my knife, so we know the stone is harder than the knife blade.”

A note of excitement crept into his voice. “Sandy, you may have something here. It certainly could be a topaz or ruby, but until we do further testing in England, we won’t know. How exactly did you get them?”

Sandy proceeded to describe the porter, Bataar’s help, and the sinister feeling Bataar had about the stones.

Back in his tent, Sandy wrote a letter to Emma. He included in the envelope a roll of film: photos of the expedition members, an itinerant monk, camp scenes, yaks, and Bataar with his men. He was about to seal the envelope when he paused. Why not put in one of the red stones as a surprise? He’d present Emma with the other on his return home. All of his letters had reached Emma, so he wouldn’t worry about the stone going astray. He wouldn’t tell her about the lama from Rongbuk Monastery, who warned them not to climb Mount Everest because of the demons who lived there. Just superstitious nonsense.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Kathmandu, Nepal present day

The security guard dropped his inch-long cigarette butt then ground it under his well-polished black shoes. After unlocking the compound gate, the guard allowed Cynthia to slip from the green, serene oasis of the guesthouse garden.

The street was a chaotic stream of honking cars, motorcyclists, bike riders, and vehicle-dodging pedestrians. Her stomach clenched, watching a grandmotherly woman with a gray, waist-length plait, totter across carrying a canvas bag brimming with vegetables. The cabbage on top tipped over then rolled into the street like a leafy soccer ball. Grandmother tottered back to retrieve it, barely missing an oncoming taxi.

A family of four whizzed by on a motorcycle, and following them was a trishaw carrying two women in plain saris. Peddling the ancient trishaw was a man with bodybuilder's legs and a face rigid with concentration. Tassels swung from the handlebars, and the revolving back spokes spun a cheerful red, yellow and blue. Motorbikes and cars surged past the trishaw; nineteenth-century clashing with the twenty-first.

The further Cynthia explored, the more medieval-looking the city became. Before she even saw it, the pungent rot of garbage assailed her nostrils. Sacred cows rummaged through piles, searching for

food. The dogs slunk away if you approached, but the cows, perhaps knowing they were gods, stayed put.

Back at the guesthouse, she decided that what she needed was company, so she went down to the lobby, picked up the in-house phone, and asked to be connected to Professor White. It rang three times before he answered.

“Hello.”

“Professor White?”

“Yes.”

“Umm. We haven’t met yet, but I’m Cynthia Graham, and I’m on your climb. How about sharing a get-to-know-you meal?”

“Call me, Jon. Do you like momos? There’s a restaurant close by specializing in them.”

“What’s a momo?”

“Easier to show than to tell. Shall we meet down in the lobby in, say, fifteen minutes?”

“Sounds good to me. Ahh, what do you look like?”

“Five foot ten, slim, and am wearing a brown sweater.”

Back in the lobby, she watched a thin, ascetic man in his late forties or early fifties drift down the stairs wearing a brown sweater. After shaking hands, they walked down Freak Street toward the restaurant and grabbed an empty table in the back. The restaurant was bare-bones basic; tables were covered with the local woven Dhaka fabric in an abstract pattern in red, white, and black.

“What are you a professor of?”

“Oriental studies at Oxford. For the past two weeks, I’ve been on a fact-finding mission in Kathmandu. Thought I’d embark on some research before the climb.”

Their waiter brought plates of fist-sized, white steamed and fried dumplings to their table then left to get Jon a beer.

She forked one, dipped it, and took a bite. A burst of coriander, garlic, cilantro, and chilies flooded her mouth. "They're fabulous."

"A man I know haunts this place, so they've nicknamed him Momo Joe. If you don't watch out, they'll become an addiction. Say, we have a free day here tomorrow, why don't you join me? I'd be happy to show you some interesting sights."

"Great," she answered with a big smile.

After a morning of temple hopping with Jon, she spent the rest of the day on her own, loading up on souvenirs for her father and friends. It took just a few minutes to arrive at her room. She fished around for the key in her pocket, then unlocked the door. She flicked on the room light. Nothing. Power outage? After tossing her packages onto the bed, she tried turning on the bedside lamp. Nothing. Fumbling around, she discovered the cord was pulled from the wall. When she plugged it back in, the thirty-watt bulb flickered to life, and she spotted a piece of paper under the door.

Cynthia,

*Dorje phoned and wants a short meeting around
7:00 p.m. to discuss the climb. The phones are out, so
we'll knock on your door.*

Cheers,

Jon

It was 6:45 p.m. If she hurried, she'd have just enough time for a quick shower. She was unbuttoning her shirt when a hiss like a leaky valve caused her to pause. Odd, she thought, that thick rope hadn't been there earlier. What was it doing next to the bathroom door? In the bulb's dim light, the shadowy line uncurled as if maneuvered by an invisible hand. Cynthia's mouth went cottony. In a heart-pounding moment, reality shifted, and a dark presence rose from the floor. The room filled with a palpable menace. All she could do was stare at a flickering tongue, and a body slithering toward her.

Run, screamed her brain, but the unblinking reptilian eyes held hers, and her feet felt stapled to the floor.

The cobra's flickering tongue tasted the air as if memorizing her scent. Watching her, its mottled brown and yellow hood flared open like a pharaoh's headdress. Escape? But where to? The bed. She leaped up.

The snake paused, then unbelievably, reared up to the height of a man. How could it do that? Grabbing souvenirs she'd bought as ammunition, she lobbed them. A demon mask and copper bowl hit the snake squarely, forcing a retreat by the door. The hissing became angrier.

Her eyes swept the bed. Nothing left but beaded necklaces. She tossed an aqua one, it tangled in the snake's hood, giving the cobra a jaunty, pirate-like look. The cobra's furious hiss now sounded like a steam locomotive.

Then, shockingly, it flew right at her. She ducked. With a dull thud, it landed on the opposite side of the bed. Now what? Her eyes fixed on the desk chair. She jumped off the bed, picked the chair up, and turned it upside down. Chair in hand, she advanced towards the wriggling heap. Only one of them would leave this room alive.

Fighting back a wave of nausea, she maneuvered the squirming, writhing, hissing mass against the wall. It wriggled free. Again, she pushed it back, making sure the darting head couldn't reach her. A stalemate, but for how much longer? "Help! Snake!" She screamed.

The door burst open behind her. A voice commanded. "Don't move."

"As if I'm going to!"

"Lean to the right, but keep the head pinned."

A rush of motion, then a knife-wielding man charged the snake. Grabbing it by the throat, he stabbed, but like a giant kraken, the snake coiled its tentacle-like body around his arm and squeezed. The undulating mass now totally obscured the man's arm and inched toward his neck. The man stabbed and stabbed until blood pooled on the floor, and with a shudder, the snake stopped struggling.

The man wiped his knife on the orange and yellow bedspread like a smear of strawberry jam. "Were you bitten?"

Too drained to talk, she only shook her head.

"Good. Bad enough, this was a king cobra, but consider yourself lucky it wasn't a spitting cobra if it'd hit your eyes with its venom.... Anyway, let's get out of here."

She didn't need a second invitation. Along with Basu, and Jon, a crowd of mostly Nepalese staff, had gathered around the door.

The tall Nepali man motioned to one of the staff. "Don't just stand there, clean it up. Basu, tell the manager she needs a new room."

A concerned-looking man quickly returned with a garbage can muttering, "*Naga*."

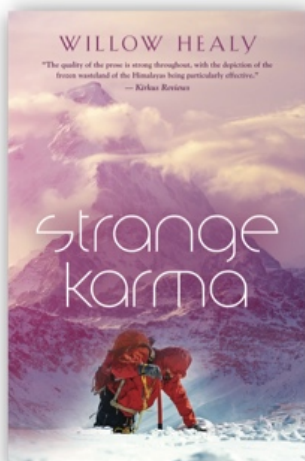
There was a sick satisfaction as Cynthia watched the snake's body drop with a plop into the can.

She took a deep breath. "I want to thank you for all you did in there. How'd it get in?"

"Even large snakes can squeeze into tight places. Could've entered while the maid was cleaning, and hid under the bed," Dorje said. "You did a good job pinning it down."

Cynthia stared at his slab of granite cheekbones, basalt black eyes, eyes that had seen a lot of life, and didn't look like they missed much. "Who are you?"

"I'm Dorje."



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