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Chapter 1: Burning cold

He didn't know what it was that woke him, but as soon as his eyes were open he knew that something terrible, something almost too frightening to think about, was happening. It was bitterly cold. So cold it might have been the start of the end of the world. It was winter and he and his partner Rohini had two Indian padded, cotton quilts on their bed. These were warm enough for any winter night they had ever had there on the Deccan plateau where temperatures could drop at night to near freezing. But this cold was coming through the quilts and eating his body warmth like nothing he had ever known and they had often camped in the high Himalayas. He could hear the wind howling around the house like the jackals that often visited the farm. They always slept with the windows open. The wind was whistling through the mosquito mesh and hitting the skin of his face and shoulders like a shower of acid. They usually slept nude all year round although Rohini sometimes pulled on a pair of trekking socks. Griff gave her a nudge.

"What, what? What is it?" she said, sitting up.

"There's something bad happening. Very bad. So bad I don't know what to think."

"Oh god, what is it? Is it the dogs, a rabid dog, bandits, have the animals got loose? God, it's cold, has the roof gone or something?"

"Worse than that."

"Worse? How could it be worse?"

"There's worse, believe me. We don't get cold like this in this part of India. It's not possible. You know when we camp in the mountains in autumn or in Ladakh and there is an early snow storm, it's not as bad as this. If we don't do something we'll freeze to death by morning. We have to get up now."

They rolled out of bed and the cold was burning. It was getting colder by the minute. They had a large teak chest at the foot of the bed

with winter clothes and some trekking gear. They dragged gear out and put it on, including boots.

"Whatever could be doing this?" Rohini said, just as Griff was trying to sort out the possibilities in his own head.

"It's hard to say but it's got to be one of the following. The world has flipped out of orbit, or been knocked out of it and is hurtling into space away from the sun. That's probably the worst option and means we'll be dead within twenty-four hours. Or there has been a huge volcanic eruption that has put a blanket of ash between the sun and the earth, or it could be a large asteroid impact that has done that or even a nuclear war. But I don't think it's any of those. We almost certainly would have felt the impact. There is another possibility and, because of the wind, I think that must be the most likely one."

"Oh hell, what is it?"

"I think the earth has wobbled on its axis and we are now at the North Pole or very near it. Somewhere in the Arctic zone at least."

"That's wonderful. We haven't got any skis or sleds and only two ill-matched mongrel dogs." She laughed. "Do we need to get out fast?"

Griff looked out the window as he closed it and could see that snow was starting to fall thickly and build up on the window sills. "No. I think there will be a massive and murderous rush to get away. The roads will be choked. There will be accidents everywhere. People will be freezing to death in cars and on motorbikes. There'll be robbery and murder. People killing people to get their cars, their fuel, food and clothing."

"Yes. I expect you are right. It will be mayhem. But can we afford to wait?"

"Yes, I think we can and we will survive if we act now. The good thing is that a large part of the world, most of the world, will still be functioning fairly normally and they will get rescue operations in hand. We need to survive until the great stampede is over. Could be a month or two. There should be news bulletins on TV and radio. We'll have power from our solar panel inverter battery for a few hours at least if not from the government grid."

Rohini went upstairs to switch the inverter on so they could turn on the television and Griff went downstairs to the sitting room to get the fire going. They had a slow combustion wood burning stove that would keep the whole house warm if they kept it going day and night. There were still some embers there and Griff added kindling and small pieces of wood and fanned them into flames.

Rohini came downstairs and turned on the TV. It usually took a minute or so to warm up and get the satellite picture.

"I've put water on to make coffee," Griff said. "We'll have to keep the stove going twenty-four hours a day. Next to food it's our most important thing to do. If it goes out we die."

"Well, at least we've got plenty of good dry hardwood to keep it going for months. Okay, here it is. I've got the news," Roh said. She turned up the volume so they could hear it above the wind. "You were right, Griff."

A panel of earth scientists and geographers on BBC-TV were exercising their hobby-horses. The earth had changed its axis. India and China had moved close to the North Pole. The US, Europe and Australia had moved closer to the tropics. Gigantic storms were raging on land and sea everywhere with massive flooding and damage, and that would hamper rescue operations. The United Nations Security Council was holding an emergency meeting to decide on how to cope with the cataclysm. Panic migration was expected. Fleets of large ships were being mobilised to take refugees from India and China and nearby nations to safe havens. Scientists were not agreed on what had caused it. Some said it was just a natural event that could happen at any time and had happened before.

Others said it had happened now because the ice caps were melting due to global warming. It might flip back to the old position soon or it mightn't. No way to tell. Others were saying that the gradual movement of the tectonic plates over millions of years had altered the gyroscopic balance of the earth and it had flipped to the new perfect pole position. We were lucky the earth hadn't wobbled. Hadn't flipped back and forth creating even greater chaos than had already occurred. The Archbishop of Canterbury and the Pope were saying the clean

jump from one axis to another showed the hand of god. He was still looking after us.

"Ah, Dr Pangloss isn't dead after all and I bet the nuts who talk to god are saying it has been caused by the growing weight of sin," Griff said.

"Well, the old ice cap may be melting but we've got another one forming here right now, so we had better get to work." Griff got one of the kerosene storm lanterns from the pantry, lit it and hung it in the sitting room.

"Let's sit down with our coffee," Rohini said, "and do a quick list of priority jobs."

"Ooooh, nooo," she cried, "the dogs, the poor dogs. We have to get them inside." She rushed for the front door. The dogs slept in big woven bamboo baskets lined with hessian bags on the front veranda.

"We'd better get Namji, Wasanta and Seema and Suman while we are at it," Griff added.

Namji, the nickname for Namdeo, was the night-watchman and Wasanta was the dairy hand. Seema was his wife. Wasanta and Seema had a room in one of the farm outhouses. Suman, their widowed, elderly housekeeper cook, lived in a room adjoining Wasanta and Seema. Namji had a house and small farm on their road half a kilometre away, but at nights he slept on a charpoy, a bed frame strung with twine, under the awning of the old house and storerooms that now formed part of the farm outhouses and cattleshed.

The dogs stumbled shivering out of their baskets as they got to them. They gave them a quick pat and rub and then ran across the farm yard or wasti to the outhouse area adjoining the dairy. The wind was whipping snow into their eyes and stinging the skin like wasps. There was a light in Wasanta and Seema's room and they banged on the door. The four of them, wrapped in blankets, were huddled around the small metal shegdi, a portable wood or charcoal fired cooking stove.

"Bai, Saheb, what is happening? We are so cold?" Wasanta cried.

Rohini told them there was a serious weather problem and they would have to come into the house straight away bringing their food and clothing. She would explain the weather problem in detail in the

house. Everyone grabbed something, cooking pots, kerosene, utensils, bedding and bags of grain. By the time they got to the house they were close to numb with the cold. They settled them around the stove to warm up and gave them a coffee each with a tot of rum. The dogs, Rani, a medium sized black and white mongrel bitch and Digger, a big pai dog, were standing and looking a bit lost. Roh and Griff brought their baskets in and settled them near the stove with a biscuit each. They were happy.

Namji was an ex-soldier who had been discharged after being shot in the knee and had a limp, but was young and fit, well-built and strong. A very handy man. He could read and write, take orders and handle weapons which Griff thought might be needed before their uncertain situation was resolved. Wasanta and Seema were illiterate but far from stupid. They were smart and strong, hard-working and loyal, as was Namji. As soon as they had recovered from the shock of the sudden cold, they were plying Rohini with questions. Griff's Marathi was okay for basic things but Roh was a linguist. She explained in simple non-scientific terms that the earth had tilted on its axis, an event which had happened in prehistoric times and could probably occur at almost any time, and that India was now near the North Pole which was an icy wilderness continent. That meant that where they were on the western side of the Deccan Plateau, along with all of India and most of China, would slowly turn into a new icy continent and what was left of the former North Pole would melt completely. Meanwhile they would experience massive freezing storms as the cold air moved in from the old pole. They would be without sunlight for many months, then they would have six months of light and weak sunshine. She explained that they would have to try to survive until they could be rescued but that it would be very dangerous. They would all have to work very hard to make themselves secure and that they might be attacked by people wanting to take their food and fuel and clothing. She said that most of the world would be operating normally, although they would also be affected by climate change that would cause storms and flooding and that rescuers would come looking for them sooner or later. They needed to keep their heads, work together and survive until then. Roh

asked if Griff wanted to add anything. She would translate. He said that he would post Namji as watchman on the front door with a shotgun and that all the other doors must be kept locked at all times. No-one was to go out without telling Namji and another person where they were going, and how long they would be. Namji would write that in a log and they might soon start having daily passwords so that Namji would know when someone who was not one of their group was approaching. Because of the dark it would be difficult working and keeping the place secure. They would have a lot of work to do immediately and they would be given jobs shortly, when Roh and he had worked out a list of things to be done. He said that Rohini and he wanted them to stay with them for safety and they were sure they could survive. Griff knew that the most pressing topic on their minds was the fate of their relatives. He told them that if they wished to go to their relatives or friends in the village that they could do so, but to try to go any further than that would be suicide. They could not bring their relatives back to the house, except that Namji could bring his wife, Laxmi, and teenage daughter, Jyoti. There would be people maddened by fear who would do anything to get food, firewood or fuel, warm clothing and shelter. They would probably have a few more joining them. Perhaps the supervisor and his deputy from Roh's other farm, Kamala farm, nearby and that would make ten people counting Namji, Wasanta, Seema and Suman.

Griff said he thought they could not go beyond ten people in the house along with food and fuel, including livestock which they would need to have in the house, because it might be three months or more before rescuers came along. Wasanta and Seema seemed satisfied with that and said that they wanted to stay with Bai and Saheb. They had no close relatives in the nearby village. Their relatives lived five or six kilometres away. Namji said he would leave straight away to get his wife and daughter, Jyoti. Suman had many relatives living near the village but she realised they were too numerous to be accommodated in the house. They would have to do the best they could, she said.

Griff told Namji to take the one-bullock cart and be back within an hour and to bring what clothing, grain and other food, cooking pots, kerosene and useful items they could carry and to try to get an

idea of what, if anything, was happening along the road. Griff gave him an old pair of his boots and a couple of pairs of thick socks as well as a heavy jacket and a pair of leather gloves and told him that he would have to bind Laxmi and Jyoti's feet with cloth, pull plastic bags over them and then tie a piece of bagging around the feet to give grip on the snow. Griff realised that he would have to do something quickly about footwear because the men would all have to go out into the snow almost straight away to bring in tools, grain, logs and equipment. The locals often went barefoot and at best wore sandals. Plastic bags wouldn't be adequate. They would only do for a very short trip. But he knew they had old car tubes and tyres in one of the godowns. He would cut lengths of tubes that would reach up to the knees and seal them at the toe end with a wire twist. He could then cut half shoes from old tyres to go under the foot and be tied on over the instep so that they could walk without slipping. They would have to wrap cloth around their feet before pulling on the rubber boots. But before then Roh and he needed to do the priority job list.

"Griff, I have to try to speak to my parents. The phones may be jammed but I have to try," she said, and headed up the stairs to the roof to use her mobile phone.

"Go. I'll start drafting jobs."

Rohini's parents lived in Pune, one hundred and twenty kilometres from the farm. Her father was a manufacturer of agricultural equipment and her mother an English lecturer at the university. They were well off and well connected and had links with the US as well as with Australia. Griff guessed they would be already making plans to fly out to the US where Rohini's brother and sister lived. All Griff's relatives were in Australia. He called out to Rohini to try to get through to his brother in Perth to let him know that they were fine. His brother would spread the word through his family.

Griff loaded up the fire with fresh logs and brought another two armfuls in from the front veranda where he always stacked wood during the winter months. He let Namji out, bolted the door and sat down with his coffee and a notepad to make a list of urgent jobs. The two most pressing needs were food and firewood and in that they were very lucky. They had at least one hundred and fifty bags of

wheat, millet, sorghum, maize and chick pea in the godowns for seed and sale use and many tonnes of dry firewood. Rohini grew grain crops on the farm and ran a small timber business from eucalypt plantations that took up about half of her forty-acre home farm. On the other family farm, Kamala, half a kilometre away, she raised sheep as well as fodder crops. There were more than three hundred ewes and two hundred half-grown lambs there and if they could bring some across to the main homestead they would be in a fairly secure situation for several months. They had two huge haystacks on the home farm and another three at Kamala that would keep the livestock going if they could shelter them from the cold.

However, the first job was to get the shotgun out, check it and load it. Namji would be door watchman with the gun. They had one whistle which they would give him to use in the case of the need to alert them all to danger. Next, Griff would need to get the old tubes and tyres from the godowns, a hundred metres away, to make snow boots so that they could work outside carrying grain, stockfeed, tools and fuel and other useful items to the house. They would need to stack furniture in the study and sitting room against the windows to make them secure and to clear space in the middle for grain and timber storage and livestock. Meanwhile, Wasanta and Namji would go to Kamala farm, with two bullock carts to bring Subhash and Ramesh, the supervisor and his deputy, along with grain, kerosene, clothing, bedding and lambs. Reinforcing the front and back doors with teak planks was about the next priority. Griff figured it would take several days at least before the surviving hard people from the local area, the ones who would stop at nothing to get what they wanted, would come calling and it would take a couple of days to get the top priority jobs done.

Rohini came down from the roof terrace after trying to get the calls out to her family. "I couldn't get through to my parents. They weren't answering. I reached your brother. They were worried, but I told them if anyone could survive it's you and me. I said we would be staying on here for a while. They sent their love and said they would tell the hotline the Australian Government had set up in Canberra, where we

were and that we needed rescuing," she said. Griff could see she was upset.

"Thanks for that, my love. I am sorry about your folks, but I reckon they would be safe. They are probably at the airport waiting for a flight out. We know they don't use mobile phones and getting hold of a public phone to call you would be hard if not impossible."

She came over and gave Griff a hug and started to cry softly into his shoulder. She was the youngest of her parents' children and very close to them. Griff had been a little surprised initially that she hadn't wanted to rush to Pune to help them but she was clever and he knew she would know that she would never make it.

"They are old but I don't want them to die. I want to see them again."

"You will, Roh, you will. They will get out to the US and we will survive here. You'll be able to meet them after we get rescued from here."

"How can you be sure of that?"

"Trust me. I know we can do it. We've got the supplies, the fuel, the help, a house we can make into a fortress and, most of all, we've got brains and grit."

Griff didn't tell Roh that he'd had a moment of despair and near panic when he considered the endless list of things he would have to do and organise to set them up and keep them safe. But he had pulled out of it. He knew he was the only one of the group who had the know-how and the vision to get them through this crisis. Roh was brilliant in her field but she had never lived in snow country and had never been a skier. He had at least had been a cross-country skier when he lived in Canberra and had lived in the snow country for days at a time. The closest the others had been to snow and cold was an ice-cream and they'd had very few of those. They'd lived their lives dressed in nothing heavier than a pair of sandals and light cotton gear or rags. They knew nothing of the dangers of frostbite and hypothermia and how quickly they could reduce a person to a useless deadweight. He would have to think for them and make them do things they probably would have little understanding of. He would drive them relentlessly through the days and weeks of work needed to

set them all up securely. He was determined to survive himself and he would make them survive too.

Griff told Roh the priorities he had jotted down and asked her how many lambs she thought they could put in the study and how many on the roof terrace. He said he thought ten for each space.

“Oh, hell, do we have to have them in the house? My beautiful house. They will make such a mess and a stink. We'll never get the stench out.”

“Well, the sad truth, Roh, is that this house is a goner anyway. What we are doing now is a temporary survival strategy. In a couple of years this place will be under a hundred metres of ice and snow. In 10,000 years, if the planet survives, archaeologists will drill down through a mile of ice, discover it and have some interesting questions to solve.”

“Yes, I guess you're right. We just have to do everything we can now to survive until we are rescued. So you may as well double those figures for the lambs. We've got the fodder. Greater numbers will help keep them warm and some will probably die anyway, so we need extras. But how will they survive on the roof terrace? The sides are open to the weather.”

“We'll stack bales of straw to the roof around the walls on the weather sides and just a foot short on the other side for air. We have plenty of plastic tarps which we can put on the inside to protect the straw from the sheep as well as the outside to stop snow from blowing in.”

“What should we do with the first floor terrace outside our bedroom?”

“Since it is open to the sky, I thought it would be a good place to stack hay fodder. The fodder is the most space-consuming stuff we have. It will act as an insulation for our bedroom and the house generally. We can stack it with an outward slope and cover it with plastic so that the snow slides off. In that location it will be easy to get at from our bedroom.”

“That sounds good and we could do the same with the downstairs kitchen terrace and the open part of the roof terrace,” Roh said.

“Yes. And I want to stack some sawn dry logs for the stove under the straw in both places as well as the unroofed top terrace. We have to make sure we have plenty of timber for the stove in the house or close to it because I suspect that within a day or two people will be scavenging for timber as well as other things and, as you well know, desperate people around here will steal anything they can lay their hands on.”

“What do you think we should do with the dry wood already cut for sale? I would feel bad if we just kept everything and didn't help the village people desperate for heating,” Roh said.

“Give it away. There will be people screaming at the gates at 6 am wanting wood and we should let them have some. But we should ration it at 40 kg to a family otherwise the greedy will try to hog it. There's quite a few tonnes there and if we ration it out it will give us time to cut and get in all the big stuff we need to survive. And we can give away the partly seasoned poles too if anyone wants them. Okay. What next, Roh?”

“What were you planning for the cattle?”

“We need to keep the female buffalo for the milk and we can keep the buffalo heifer for the time being too. I think we should butcher the male buffalo and one of the three draft oxen fairly soon. They eat a lot of fodder and they take a lot of space to stall.”

“But where will we store so much meat? They are huge.”

“We will only do one at a time and if we haul the carcass high up into the rain tree and anchor it to the ground with a chain and padlock, this weather will keep it refrigerated. I'll drive a large steel stake into the ground to chain it to. One carcass will keep us going for weeks. We need to keep the draft oxen for dragging in stores and fuel and in a few days to go on scavenging hunts ourselves.”

“So that leaves us with three draft oxen, a milking buffalo and a heifer buffalo. Where did you think to put them?”

“In the guest suite along with a lot of fuel wood and most of the grain. The buffalo and her heifer can go in the guest bathroom. We can forget about using the bathrooms and toilet for the usual things because the drains and the septic system will be frozen solid. We will be crapping in buckets and having armpit and crutch baths with a wet

towel from now on. We'll have plenty of water from melted snow and we will need to have daily sewage runs to take out the dirty water and dump it away from the house."

"The guest suite runs off the sitting room. The smell will be terrible," Roh said.

"Yeah, that's true, but if we clean the area where we have the cattle and also the sheep rooms everyday, it won't be too bad and their body heat will help to keep the house warm. We have plenty of hands to do the work and it will keep people occupied and not sitting around worrying about their relatives dying from cold and starvation."

"Yes, that's the last thing we want."

"Are we being a little bit ironical, Roh, my love?"

"Perhaps. You seem to be so clinical about it all. You don't have any relatives in India or in danger of dying of cold and starvation, do you. You almost seem to be enjoying this."

"Yes, I am. I'm not going to sit in a corner wrapped in a blanket and wait for death. Life is a struggle and that is what makes life interesting and worth living. People who have everything handed to them on a plate get fat, lazy and unable to survive when the challenge comes."

"Yes, I do agree, Griff. I am just upset about my parents and I can't help thinking about all the people in my country who will die miserably while we have so much. This will be the end of India, won't it?"

"Death by cold is fairly quick and painless. You just feel cold a short while and then go off to sleep and anyway, it won't be the end of Indians or Indian culture. Hundreds of thousands of Indians, even millions, will survive by escaping in planes and boats and Indian culture will survive to enrich the cultures of other countries. That's been the way of things since the beginnings of human culture."

"Do you really think hundreds of thousands will survive this?"

"Yes, I reckon millions will survive. Indians are survivors and we are going to survive too, if we move quickly. Scores of people, desperate to survive, will be screaming at the gates in an hour or two. What do you want to do with the ewes and lambs we cannot use from Kamala farm?"

“Well, we cannot take all the Kamala farm workers here and most wouldn't want to come anyway. We can only take Subhash and Ramesh. So we can let the rest go to their families in the village and they can split the lambs and sheep we don't want among themselves, and give some to the village people as well.”

“That's good, Roh. Most of the people won't have enough fodder to keep even three sheep for more than a few days, so the village people will all be well fed for a while. And they will have fuel wood from here to cook the meat.

“I'll try to get Subhash on the phone, and tell him what to do. As soon as Namji gets back he and Wasanta can take the two bullocks' carts to Kamala farm and get them and their gear and bring the forty best lambs across. That means I will have to make rubber boots for Namji and Wasanta and Subhash and Ramesh right now. Let's get across to the workshop and godowns now to get tools, tubes and tyres and bring them here where I can work on them. Wasanta, you will have to stay here and guard the door.” Griff gave him the whistle and a torch and told him to lock the door from inside and only to open it when they came back. He should blow two blasts if people came and started to cause trouble.

Roh and Griff put on heavy jackets, woollen hats and gloves, took their torches and headed for the wasti – the farmyard godown area. Outside it was wild. The wind was tearing the leaves from the trees and buffeting them about. The snow was already six inches to a foot thick. Here and there dead birds lay in the snow, frozen stiff amid leaves and branches blown from the stripped trees.

“Griff, I am really worried about the cattle. We will have to get them into the house quickly. They won't survive this cold for long. Let's put them into one of the godowns now to get them out of the wind and snow and if they are all in together their own heat will help to protect them until we can clear the room in the house and move them across.”

They untied the animals. They were all standing and bellowing from time to time. They led them across into one of the empty godowns, threw armfuls of straw in for them, and closed the door.

From the main equipment godown they collected half a dozen car tubes, enough to make six pairs of long boots and two car tyres which would make the shoes to give grip in the snow. They took them across to the house and then went back to the workshop to get tools including binding wire, bolt-cutters, hacksaws and a couple of bags of other tools and bits and pieces Griff thought he could use, including ropes and twine, punches, screws, nails and bolts. Lumping the stuff back to the house through the increasingly thick snow and battling against the wind was tiring them quickly. Griff knew he would have to find some way of getting gear across to the house more quickly and easily and it came to him. He took an old axe and a hacksaw and five metres of rope and went around to the back of the wasti area where there was an old car. There were four pillars plus the areas on each side of the rear window holding the roof to the body of the car. Griff chopped into the pillars in front first and was pleased to see that the axe worked well on them. He used the hacksaw to finish off the remaining strands that the axe was not effective on. The two side pillars went quickly but the rear pillars were close to half a metre wide. Surprisingly, the axe bit into them well and the hacksaw finished them off. Griff tied the rope onto one of the pillars and pulled the roof clear of the body and flipped it over. With a rope tied around each of the two front pillars, it formed a sled that moved easily across the snow. He went back to the godowns with it and loaded it up with all sorts of gear they would need, from plastic tarpaulins and rope to lengths of teak that he would use to reinforce doors and make other improvisations. Roh and he pulled the sled over the snow to the edge of the patio to unload it. Wasanta came out to help. As they were moving the gear inside, Namji arrived back with Laxmi and Jyoti and they got them into the house and by the stove quickly to warm up. Suman had made tea for everyone and they needed it. Snow had formed clumps on their hats and shoulders.

“We’ll have to do something to keep the draft oxen warm, Griff. I just had a quick look at the one that Namji took and it looks to me as though it is suffering badly from the cold.”

“The only thing I can think of is that we use our carpets to make coats for them. Would that be enough do you think?”

“Yes, that should do well.”

Griff finished his tea and went to the guest room and the upstairs bedroom and brought out several of their precious old, hand-woven tribal carpets, Persian and Afghani, which they had collected over the years. It broke his heart but as he had said to Roh earlier, all this would soon be gone forever. When they left they would go with what they stood up in. He brought the bullock Namji had used onto the sheltered veranda and threw a rug over him, with the wool side close to the hide. He was the youngest and slimmest of their three draft oxen. The carpet covered him from the neck to the rump. Wasanta held the rug in place under the bullock's neck and Griff pushed an awl through and then threaded rope through the holes: two ties under the neck, one under the chest and one just before the hind legs and then a rope running from under the neck to the rear to hold it in place. That left him free to pee and crap without soiling the rug. Wasanta suggested another short tie under the tail to make sure the rug didn't slip around. Wasanta harnessed him back into the cart.

The next job had to be making rubber boots and car-tyre overshoes for Namji and Wasanta, so they could go across to Kamala to get Subhash and Ramesh and the lambs, and two more rug coats for the two oxen to pull the big cart across to the Kamala farm.

It didn't take Griff long to do a pair of “car-boots”. He cut a tube into two pieces, put a binding wire twist on one end to seal off the toe and cut a twenty-five-centimetre length of tyre to form the boot. The farm workers were smaller-boned with smaller, narrower feet generally than westerners. In the front part of the boot he put a permanent wire tie to hold it together and two holes on each side towards the rear to enable a piece of rope to be threaded through to go around the ankle to hold the boot in place. They weren't beautiful but this was no setting for a fashion show. Footwear was a bit of a novelty to these farm people. Most of them at best wore leather chappals or rubber thongs, and socks were affectations of city slickers. Most of the time the locals preferred to go barefoot and the soles of their feet were as tough as shoe leather. Griff showed Namji how to bind his feet with a piece of old towelling and then slip the rubber tube over the top and tie the tyre-boot on. The others all watched. When Namji had both feet

done he stood up and did a test walk and then a little dance. Griff realised that he would have to make several pairs of gloves straight away for the men going outside. He made them from woollen socks. While doing that he realised he had an old leather jacket and a pair of leather rigger's gloves that he could use as a pattern. Later he would cut gloves from the leather jacket. Namji, who would be the watchman and a couple of the other men would need gloves that would enable them to fit their fingers into the trigger guard of the shotgun. He would have to modify the trigger guard so that a leather-gloved finger could fit into it. He finished the gloves and boots and called the other men. "Teek, hey, let's go out and try them in the snow," Griff said.

Roh and Griff and Wasanta went out with him and he tramped around for a while. A different walking style was needed but he was certainly stable and in no danger of slipping. The tyre-boot had plenty of grip. They went back into the house and Roh quizzed Namji closely about how warm his feet had kept and if the boots had chafed or caused any pain. No pain, he said, but he showed them that the tubes had slipped down his leg a little. Griff fixed that with a couple of holes and a piece of twine to tie snugly around his leg above the calf muscle. That seemed to solve the warm dry footwear problem. He set to work to make a pair each for Wasanta, Subhash and Ramesh, so Namji and Wasanta could leave for Kamala farm. Roh told them to have a look at what was happening in the village on the way through and to get back as quickly as they could, hopefully within one hour. She told them to tell Subhash to share the unwanted sheep among the other Kamala farm workers who lived on the farm and that they could drive the remaining sheep into the village to be taken by whoever wanted them. She also told them to make sure that their gloves were kept dry and warm. Frost-bitten hands and feet could render a person useless and nothing more than a mouth to feed, she said.

Griff looked at the time. It was now 4.30 am. It was 2 am when they had woken and he was worrying about getting a lot of the high priority jobs done before 6.30 am, when he reckoned people would be clamouring for firewood. They still had so much to do. Griff put his arm around Roh and gave her a hug and a kiss on the cheek. Kissing on the lips was something you didn't do in front of other people unless

you were a Bollywood film star. Neither of them were that. Roh was beautiful enough to be a Bollywood actress but that would be the last thing in the world she would want to be. She had been an outstanding student who had done medicine and then decided she would much rather work with animals than people. She had become a veterinarian and a farmer and, because of her brains and drive and long hours of work, she was very successful. She served on several government advisory bodies and published papers that were widely quoted internationally. She was lean and wiry but shapely. Griff often told her she had the most beautiful backside in the world. Her face had chiselled lines with wide-set eyes, full lips and clear skin. She had a wonderful spontaneous laugh and an equally explosive temper if things were not done according to instructions. Griff thought she worked too hard. Driven. Her family were Chitpawan Brahmins from Konkan, the south west coastal plains of India, and they had been pioneers in education and social development in India for several generations. They were sophisticated and cosmopolitan people who were devoted to helping India struggle free of poverty, ignorance and religious superstition. The women in her family were independent and free-spirited. They made their own decisions about lifestyle and marriage. There was a belief among many Indians that the Chitpawan Brahmins were descended from the crew of one of Alexander's ships that was blown out of history by a massive storm that swept the Gulf of Cambay when his navy with half his army was trying to make its way back to Greece after the Indian campaign. The ship is said to have landed in Konkan and its crew settled there, intermarrying with the locals. They were, according to the British in the days of the Raj, scholarly and innovative in agriculture among other things. Rohini had travelled abroad with her family since her teenage years and had studied in the UK and Australia, but she was never going to emigrate.

She and Griff had a shared interest in natural history and had met during a natural history trek in the mountains of the Western Ghats. The attraction was immediate. They kept in touch by letter and telephone almost daily while Griff made arrangements back in Australia to be able to move to India to spend a sabbatical year with Rohini. He was lecturing in Australian history in Canberra and had

been in India lecturing on the social and historical background to the works of Patrick White when they met. Griff lived on a small, hobby farm on the rural fringe of Canberra. He had grown up working on farms in Western Australia as a boy in his school holidays and had never lost his love of country life. The skills he had picked up on farms, working with his hands and improvising, served him well at Rohini's place. He collected and restored antique teak furniture and used old teak to build new pieces and built additions to the house. Gradually, as his Marathi improved, he took over much of the running of the timber business while Rohini concentrated on her veterinary clinic work and research. He had rented out his property and decided to live in India for the foreseeable future. Since then they had been together for eight years and felt very happy with their situation. They had no children and no plans to have any. Rohini believed India already had more than enough people and Griff had no urge to argue with her about that. They lived a very comfortable life with a large stone house of three stories, their own clean water bores, and grew much of their food from grain, to fruit and poultry. They had close to an acre of garden with large flowering trees, shrubs and ferns around the house and it was a beautiful place to be. The birds loved it as much as they did. It was an oasis of greenery, shade and shelter in farming countryside in which most of the trees had been cut down. The local farmers didn't want trees. Any patches of shade reduced the productivity of their crops. Griff and Roh new all the birds that came to their garden. Some stayed all the year and others came only in the winter to escape the cold of northern India. They had magnificent white paradise flycatchers with flowing thirty-centimetre tails, and a host of other flycatchers, magpie robins, golden orioles, hair-crested drongos, crow pheasants, partridges and jewel-like sunbirds, many of whom were almost tame. Sunbirds, finches, bulbuls and tailor birds nested in the shrubs on the front patio. They had a large paved front patio adjoining the veranda surrounded by ferns and beyond that an equally large paved barbecue area overhung by giant gulmohur trees and scented neems and bordered by ferns and the sweetly perfumed ratrani, 'queen of the night' creepers. Often, as many as six golden orioles would gather in the trees around the house and sing their

beautiful fluting calls. The hair-crested drongo, a winter visitor, would mimic sounds from inside the house. Roh and Griff were amazed to hear it imitating the rusty squeak of the sprocket on their indoor clothes line when Suman hoisted it up and down. Soon it would all disappear forever beneath an ice continent. Perhaps in twenty million years it would re-emerge, thrusting upwards to the light as part of a new mountain range. Griff didn't want his or Rohini's bones to be among the fossilised relics emerging then. He wanted to postpone the dispersal of their molecules back into the building blocks of the universe for quite some decades yet. But most of their beloved birds were already dead, frozen stiff and blasted out of the trees.

Roh's parents had built the house when Roh was a teenager. It was strong and roomy with a reinforced concrete frame and floors, and basalt walls. It was robust enough to resist storms and earthquakes. Roh and her parents had planted lots of trees and when Griff came he added the patios and established the garden with the help of the farm workers. They planted lawns using couch grass collected from wild patches around the farm; poached clippings and seedlings of shrubs from friends and gathered ferns from around waterfalls in the hills. Griff planned a reticulation system for the garden and Sonba, the farm mechanic and driver, built it out of old water pipes. It was fed by a new bore they had sunk near the house. A veranda ran all the way across the front of the house leading into a spacious sittingroom-diningroom with the slow combustion wood stove Griff had imported from Australia. Off that, to the left, was a guest suite of bedroom and bathroom with lavatory. Beyond the sitting room was a very big kitchen with marble top benches around two sides and a pantry beneath the stairs which led to the second floor. Off the kitchen to the left was an open terrace about seven metres square, where Suman dried bananas and ground grain daily on a small basalt grindstone to make their chapattis. In the corner close to the back doors was a chip-wood shower water heater. All the ceilings were twelve feet high for cooling in the summers, when the temperatures rose to the mid-forties centigrade.

The first floor held a large bedroom with built-in cupboards all around between the windows, a large bathroom with shower and

lavatory and a study as big as the bedroom. Leading through French windows to the left from the bedroom was an unroofed terrace with a one and a half metre high parapet around it. The stairs continued up to the loft that led to the roof terraces of which there were three. It was a flat-roofed house with reinforced concrete skeleton and slab ceilings. Griff had roofed the terrace at the front of the house overlooking the patio and the main part of the garden to reduce the heat of their bedroom in the summer and to prevent pooling of water when the monsoon rains hammered down in October and November. Before, they had to sleep out on the terrace in summer under mosquito nets because the room was like a sauna. Flat roofs are a taunt to nature and nature nearly always wins. Inevitably water would find a way through minuscule hairlike cracks in the roof to drip into their bedroom. But now no longer. There was another equally large unroofed terrace on the other side of the house and between the two, leading straight out from the door, a smaller terrace where they kept the rain gauge, now unneeded. There was another small terrace above the loft which held their water tank, filled daily by pumping water up from the main bore. It was a big, comfortable and strong rather than beautiful, house and before the trees had grown up all around they could see for miles from the roof terrace. Griff had built a large table from an old teak farmhouse door for the roofed terrace and a dresser for essentials and they had put cane furniture there. It was something like seven metres above the ground and all year round it was a delightful place to be among the tree tops with the birds. They often had breakfast, lunch and drinks while watching the sun set on days that were not so busy. Their house guests spent a good part of their days up there reading and writing. Would the archaeologists who rediscovered the place in the far distant future when the ice cap shifted once again be able to tell what a peaceful and pleasant life they had lived there before the ice storm, Griff mused. Historians say the Carthaginians would sit out on their roof terraces and sip a fermented drink in the evenings in the time before the Roman horde swept down and wiped out their city. Everything dies and rots or crumbles, Griff said to himself, and despite his mother's assurances that the bad always get their comeuppance and the good survive, he knew that the good and the

beautiful perished along with the bad and the ugly when nature decided to flex her muscles. All life was a struggle, he believed, and when you stopped struggling, exploring, fucking and fighting for what you believed, you started to die. It was a rule of nature. He felt a sort of exhilaration about the struggle to survive that now faced them. It was a chance to stretch the mind, to dig into the lode of knowledge acquired over decades, to try out ideas, to pit himself against the elements, work with people he loved and to fight off those people who would try to pull him down and take what he had. Griff was only of medium height but he was well-muscled, fit and agile mentally and physically and confident about solving problems. He had clever hands. He knew that he and Roh and their small tribe were going to fight and with a little luck get through to peaceful times on the other side of this calamity. Live to a hundred years or die in the attempt was Griff's mantra. Griff and Roh didn't bother with gods and, so far as they could tell, gods didn't bother with them. This disaster that had engulfed them wasn't personal. There was no malice in it. It was simply nature doing what it had to do to keep going and they would do what they had to do, to accommodate it.