

The background of the cover is a soft, painterly landscape. It features rolling hills and a deep valley filled with a thick, golden mist or fog. In the center of the valley, a tall, slender rock pillar rises from the ground, topped with a small, square stone tower that has two pointed turrets. The overall color palette is warm, dominated by shades of yellow, gold, and brown, creating a dreamlike and atmospheric scene.

STRAWBERRY
TREES

BALBEER *BANI*

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Balbeer Bahi

First published 2026

by The Storytelling Machine.com

2nd Prototype test-print of 5

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ISBN: 978-XXXXXXXXXX

Cover designed by BBAI

Dedicated to:

The four generations of Kaurs and Singhs
thanks to Mum and Dad, esp. my sisters & brothers,
Zanardi & Nirin, Luna & Azaelea.

prologue

loch durann

{*november 1991*}

Nevena Vancheva stood patiently, clutching the lapels of her purple crepe trench coat. Distracted by her squirrel-tail of scarlet hair, buffeted shoulder-to-shoulder by shrieking gales determined to pitch them down the heather-scarred slope, Sandeep Kapany, an eye to his Konica's eyepiece, coaxed his zoom's crosshairs to align on Durann Castle's distant turrets.

Two miles east, the once unassailable medieval fortress, now a regal hotel, perched on its private islet within the five-mile long, crescent-shaped loch. Ringed by glorious Scottish hills and mountain horizons, it looked spectacular. He snapped the photograph.

Thumbing the advance lever – four shots left – the desolate castle, his proposed '*perfect*' location for their spring X-Vision IPO, looked corpse-grey to the naked eye.

Glasses slipped from inside pocket onto the weals on her high-bridged nose, Nevena squinted under her overstretched University beanie. "Your fruitcakes."

Sandeep panned his zoom toward the distant buzzing. The endearingly named *'fruitcakes'*, an investigative team from the UK Hydrological Monitoring Trust studying why the loch's wildlife had vanished, having spent all morning up at Loch Durann's peak, now piloted their canary-yellow RIB back to the castle-cum-hotel. *A grey-green shadow, twice their size, pursued their wake.*

Sandeep looked up. Wind ruffled the loch's shimmering surface. He was too far to see anything clearly.

"Can I...?" Nevena reached for his camera.

Strap released from under his parka hood, circled over his *'pagh'* – his turban – Nevena took the camera, raised her frameless glasses, placed eye to eyepiece and focussed quickly.

"Something is wrong."

"It's a little old..."

"No. Them."

The ecology team's distant hull rose and slapped foam repeatedly, an urgency to their buzzing outboards. Sandeep's stomach tightened. *That chasing shadow.*

"I hope that *'pich'* Martin drowns." She *clicked* the shutter. Bulgarian accent strongest in the curse, she passed the camera back.

"*'Pich'*? That doesn't sound nice."

"Arse."

Film wound – three shots left. Camera bag slipped from shoulder to waist, Sandeep swapped lenses methodically, the zoom for a fifty-millimetre... which refused to lock. He felt Nevena's gaze: *if he can't manage his own camera, he wants a multi-million IPO deal...?* He stifled curses... *twisting, untwisting, twisting*, until the collar sealed. "It's old."

He stepped back, adjusted aperture, speed, and framed Nevena. "May I?"

Nevena pocketed her glasses, contradicting her stance of scholarly defiance. Winds flung her casual ponytail. He hadn't

the audacity to ask her to loose it; the contrasting splash of red would be vivid against the dark storm-clouds... smothering her solitary car on the mountain verge. *Click* – wind – *click*.

“One left.”

Head tilted, she relaxed. Crosshairs sharpened her green eyes, focussed in return on his pagh. A smile that upstaged every background. *Click*.

The light shifted.

The storm the hotel’s owners had forewarned them of scrubbed whole mountains, the northern horizon, from view.

“Perfect.” Sandeep congratulated Nevena for choosing the photo location, fingers reflexively checking his pagh for loose fabric. “Shame about the weather.”

“Weather is wonderful.” Nevena leaned into the wind. “That hotel. That is a shame.”

Unsure what she meant, he checked Loch Durann for the UKHMT boat. It neared Durann Castle on its singular islet, the accumulating storm lifting the waves. Must have been the clouds’ shadow, that grey-green *thing*.

Lights popped over the loch’s southern hillside opposite. A white panel van crawled the lonely road to the hotel’s car park...

A broadside of stinging globs.

They ran. Rain abetting wind to hoist them away at the hint of a slip. Sandeep stumbled on loose slate... Nevena's hand found his. They skipped across random mounds of slate rubble and granite outcrops peppering traumatised grass.

Drenched in the half-minute it took Nevena to slide into the driver’s seat and yank open the passenger door, Sandeep hunched instinctively, lowering his pagh through the door frame. Rain thundered on thin steel. Loch Durann, the castle-hotel, the ecologists' boat... everything dissolved in the unpropitious twilight.

b. bahi

Nevena dried her face with tissues from a box on the dashboard. Offered him, he plucked, stowed bag in rear, and dried wispy beard. "Think we'll catch a boat?"

"Not sure I want to." Seatbelt on, key twisted the engine into life. Main lights flipped on, instantly overwhelmed wipers, she inched a five-point turn on the slickening, cracked tarmac. "This hotel reminds me of Transylvania. Dracula's castle. Ever been? I have. Romania. Not far. Like England, Scotland."

Selecting first, her Renault crept down the mountain in the all-enveloping monsoon.

chapter one
the crossing

Nevena's headlights carved a tunnel through the deluge, a surreal wormhole of electric raindrops hovering in the distance, simultaneously hammering the windscreen. She leaned forward as if proximity would improve visibility through the sworls. The mountain road's unguarded edge, guesswork to the right, plunged into awaiting nothingness. The Renault's engine whined in second gear.

Red eyes stared back from the middle of the road.

"What the...?" She prodded the brakes.

"Mind..." Sandeep muttered.

Just a solitary sheep, Nevena slowed, murmured, "Sheep like storms," edged around the curious creature, and drove on.

After a few moments, she laughed, "I am sorry. Those eyes. It is so quiet here. Have you seen *American Werewolf in London*?"

"Yeah. Love it." Sandeep peered through the rain. Somewhere out there was that raging loch they'd have to cross.

"Lycanthropes. The myths. Started with Vikings." Even voicing her thoughts, she drove smooth, confident. "Wolfskins. Bear furs. Drinking. Fighting. Berserkers. In firelight. Looked like they transformed. Into animals. Lycanthropes. Anthropomorphism. Zoomorphism. I never know which."

“Nor me,” Sandeep chimed in, no idea which word meant what. “Where’d you hear all this?”

“Books. Books. Always too many books.”

They reached the main road, barely wide enough for two vehicles but enough for her to shift into third and relax a smidgen.

“Dracula, werewolves.” Sandeep sat back. “Sounds like you got it bad.”

“I am sorry.” Nevena quickly glanced across. “It is just... My thesis. It is... what you say? *Doing my head in.*”

“Don’t worry. I understand.” He’d seen a lot of people crack under pressure. “Romania. Transylvania. What’s that like?”

“My father. When we were children. He would drive us, my mother, brother, me, to Romania. Hungary. Yugoslavia. His job. Construction. Social Housing. He wanted to see. Other cities. Communist cities.”

“Dracula was a communist?” Sandeep hoped to make her smile.

“What...? No!” She enjoyed the absurdity. Back to the road, thoughts fragmented. “Those old castles. The Ottomans. Dracula. Histories. Stories.”

He wasn’t surprised. Last night, Nevena had reluctantly joined Sandeep for dinner post-apéritifs to escape Martin’s ‘*amorous advances*’. Conscious not to compound the awkwardness, Sandeep stuck to small talk and enjoying the limited set dinner: blackcurrant brie bites; roast lamb with local root vegetables; November summer pudding. To impress, he’d ordered two bottles of Merlot, expensive even at the lower end of the wine list. He could justify the ‘company expenses-entertainment’ ledger entry next week...

They reached the barely reflective signpost to Durann Village and Castle.

“We keep going?” Nevena was hesitant. “Aberdeen’s straight on.”

“You’re kidding?”

“Not entirely.” She took a deep breath, slowed, took the turn, and fell silent.

During the small talk – what they did, why they were there – he’d discovered she was holed up at the hotel, avoiding her tutors as much as the distractions of student life, to complete her PhD thesis: *The End of Economic Certainty: Global Strategy After Communism and the Gulf War*. Five weeks at the castle already, unable to focus, she’d already extended her self-imposed deadline a fortnight.

When she’d politely asked what he was doing there: scouting a conference centre for the all-important IPO for his company’s X-Vision PC, a revolutionary hand-held computer with integrated telephone, which he’d developed the X.25 packet network architecture for; Nevena paid superficial attention. Her thesis owned her headspace.

Durann village emerged through the unrelenting rain. Along its forlorn, sixty-yard main drag, a couple of dim streetlamps hosted a handful of decades-old cars. Clusters of battered houses filtered off on barely defined dirt roads. Bleached grey by the storm, it bore nothing of the welcoming, rustic village he’d conjured from the glossy brochures.

The village’s sole shop, its faded billboard flapping in the gusts, had character. He’d popped in yesterday on the way through, to get a feel for the ‘*romantic location*’. A tiny terrier nearly savaged him, but all was redeemed by the implacably polite store-owner’s outrageously cute, straggly-haired, ruddy-faced pre-school daughter. She’d stared innocently at his pugh, and sung with a rebellious grin, ‘*My trousers are minging*’...

A headlight blazed through the rear window, threw dancing shadows into the car.

A motorbike *beeped* several times. Riding way too fast for the conditions, the biker blatted past, a roaring blur of silver metal and black leather in the spray. He completed the overtake

metres before the road narrowed at the end of the main drag. Gloved left hand's thumb raised in thanks, rear light flickering, he vanished ahead toward Loch Durann.

"Fucking idiot," Nevena muttered, tracking the short spread of her headlights less extremely.

The village's remaining rogue stone cottages shrunk back into the stormy desolation. They drowned in one quality Glasgow or London could never afford: Space. Behind wooden shutters and drawn curtains, the locals probably watched the same bland quiz shows, the same weather bulletins, no different to the townies.

Sandeep felt queasy. His startup had one opportunity to pitch the X-Vision. It was complicated, expensive, contingent on enabling technologies developing in parallel at pre-projected rates in their three-year lead. But it was THE future. A successful IPO guaranteed his. His family's. He'd return to London... a hero.

Hotel Durann had style, an unsurpassable wine cellar.

But the miserable, semi-derelict Durann village, the ecologists investigating dead fish...

First impressions weren't persuasive.

Nevena crested the valley's outer rim. The sight below brought her to a stop.

Loch Durann stretched between the hills like a scar. The storm's ruffled underside barely swept over the castle's turrets. Had they still been on the mountain taking photographs, they'd truly have been in the belly of the storm.

Around the castle's stony islet, the loch thrashed so forcefully crossing was impossible; though the ecologists disagreed. The fluctuating lamp at the fore of their canary powerboat bobbed hundreds of metres from the jetty.

Lit by the car park's single arc lamp, two figures in hi-vis orange outfits unloaded a pair of coffin-shaped containers from the rear of a VW Crafter Panel van onto a flat-bed trolley.

strawberry trees

The motorbiker pulled into the grim car park below.

Nevena shook her head, and drove them down the solitary road toward the raging loch, the Renault's short wheelbase twitching in the crosswinds.

Nevena drove past snow poles either side of the ribbon of blistered tarmac. Sandeep fixed on the activity beside the jetty, and the waves hurling and dropping the ecologists' boat.

The motorbiker parked his silver machine next to the van. He moved to help with the trolley and its disturbing cargo... One of the orange hi-vis figures directed him into the van instead, then returned to dragging and shoving the trolley to the jetty.

By the time Nevena drove past the handful of cars; including Sandeep's rented Passat, a Land Rover with the Scottish Fisheries logo on the door, the powerboat's trailer hitched to it; and pulled up alongside the silver Honda VF750, the hi-vis figure was back.

Dr Jeanette Ugochi, one of the team introduced to Sandeep yesterday during aperitifs, pulled back her sodden hood and urgently gestured: *You! The van!*

Nevena cast Sandeep a nervous glance and switched off the ignition. He grabbed his camera bag and followed her out into the storm.

A few wet steps across the gravel, Nevena climbed into the van, sliding across the bench seat. Sandeep squeezed in after her, both squashed against the biker in his soaked-through leathers. Gangly, raven-haired, early twenties, a fortnight's stubble on a face tarnished by hard labour, he reeked of diesel and solvents.

Jean slammed the door so hard the panels winced. Sprinting to the driver's side, she jumped in, slamming shut that door with equal conviction.

"This is Harold, Sheona's fiancé," Jean introduced hastily, her eyes darting to the RIB.

"It's actually Hairalt," Hairalt Loughy clarified in a slower, melodic intonation than Sandeep was growing accustomed to in Glasgow. He removed a sodden glove, reached out a damp hand. "Most people are unfamiliar. Harold makes do."

"Nevena." She shook his fingertips.

"Sandeep." He reached across, shook more firmly. And dried his hand on his trousers. "Nice bike."

"It's not good any of you join us," Jean stated rapid-fire.

"It's rough for the uninitiated," Hairalt replied flatly. "I just spent my fortnight on Forties Field. This is a summer's day."

"Not the weather," Jean asserted, and faced them directly. In her mid-thirties, water dripping from her slicked back hair, her expression contradictory; the lean fitness of an endurance cyclist who hadn't slept for years. "Joe's saying it's worse. The loch. Worse with the storm. I don't know. Won't know till I see Freddie."

"Sheona'll murder me if I turn back." Hairalt rubbed his stubble. "She knows I'm here. She compensates for the off-shore..."

"There's something... *screwed up* with that lake, that loch." Jean gripped the stationary van's wheel. Water dribbled from her scalp onto her cheek. "Maybe none of us should be here. When there's no microbes..."

"It's been like that months," Hairalt agreed. "That's why you're here."

"The loch. The water..." Jean's eyes caught the powerboat's forelight approaching the jetty. "It isn't *healthy*."

“You’re the professional.” Sandeep pondered the logistics. “I’m done here. But I don’t have my car keys...”

“You can take my bike,” Hairalt grinned. “Stay over in Durann. Mrs Gordon, the bakery, she’ll have you.”

“With the terriers...?”

“My thesis,” Nevena cut Sandeep. “I have to get back. My clothes...”

“My stuff’s there too,” Sandeep swung.

“Stuff can always be forwarded...” Jean problem-solved, focused on the boat metres from the jetty’s wavering timbers. “Your choice. I’m surprised they haven’t made you sign waivers. Shake-a-leg! Come on!”

She killed the van’s headlamps.

Mooring lines flung from the boat were caught by Martin Thornhill, the second hi-vis figure on the jetty, the *‘pib’* Nevena despised, who fixed them to posts.

Heads down against rain that stung like sleet, Nevena and Sandeep hurried behind Jean and Hairalt to the snaking jetty.

Jean hurried to help Martin wheel the trolley to the RIB’s prow. Through the coffin-shaped containers’ translucent plastic, Sandeep glimpsed yellow-headed bodies dressed in red and black. *Aliens...*

The hotel’s landlord Mr John Fraser, in olive oilskin and wellies, braced the boat from within alongside the jetty’s skreaching timbers.

The eco team’s leader Joe Henderson stood on the prow, with the ease of a lifetime’s experience with the Scottish Fisheries, waiting to receive the containers.

Helmet and rucksack in hand, strolling along the jetty in his leathers as if it were indeed a summer’s day, Hairalt called to Mr Fraser.

“John!”

“Hairalt.”

“Permission to come aboard, sir.”

Needing no answer, Hairalt stepped aboard easily, and instantly stood alongside Mr Fraser in steadying the boat.

Jean and Martin one end, Joe almost one-handed the other, they carried the upper container onto the boat’s prow. *The yellow-beaded red and black bodies inside wriggled.*

“Fuck,” Sandeep whispered.

Nevena reached for Mr Fraser’s outstretched hand. Three careful steps via the boat’s runners, and she sat on the puddled bench seat.

Joe instantly lashed the first container down. Jean and Martin went back for the second.

Rigid at the thought of crossing the irate loch, Sandeep watched them struggle with the second container, convinced it would be lost to the erratic gap between jetty and boat.

“Quickly now!” Mr Fraser reached, his hotelier’s gracious patience cracking.

The entire boat flexed and groaned.

The second container loaded, Jean jumped on board to help lash it with Joe, who needed no one. Martin kneeled on the jetty, folding the trolley’s towing handle.

“Get into gear, man!” Hairalt also reached out.

Sandeep assessed the capricious distance to Nevena, who looked up wishing he’d move.

Sandeep slung his bag over his shoulder, stepped onto the runner, bent forward for Hairalt’s hand... a wave slapped the hull. Simultaneously Martin jumped onto the prow, tilting everything. The camera bag swung, he blindly grabbed for support... found air... fell forward, his head colliding with Hairalt’s. The nimbler man caught him, steadied him, but he was completely discombobulated...

By the time Sandeep recovered: Mr Fraser stood in front of him; he was in the seat next to Nevena; Hairalt the other side of her; Jean sat opposite with Martin; Joe piloted the boat; and the boat was several yards from the jetty... And his pagh's four metres of starched blue cloth floated and unravelled in the dark water, strafed by the rain. Instinctively he leaned toward it...

"You'll be following it!" Mr Fraser's discouraging hand pressed his shoulder.

Sandeep's fingers searched his head, found comfort in his jura, his topknot, which had been there since memory, under its thin handkerchief held on by an elastic band.

"I... slipped." Sandeep wanted to blame Martin, sat opposite, *smirking*. It flashed through his mind, *Martin had deliberately tipped the boat...*

"Bumpy ride, what?" Mr Fraser calmly pressed orange lifejackets into their arms. Legs strong from daily hill-walks, bent knees absorbing the undulations as if mogul skiing. "Not often we get worse!"

Worse? Water already sloshed around their ankles.

Sensing Sandeep's anxiety, life-jacket on, Nevena helped Sandeep with his.

"You two alright?" Martin called. "Nevena?"

She looked away. Sandeep nodded.

"We'll look after you!" He gave them a thumbs-up.

Irrespective of the indignant pitching, the boat refused to submit. This wasn't one of the hotel's serene, old-school, fifties, oak and larch motor launches Sandeep had crossed in several times already, with stiff varnished seats and an asthmatic diesel coughing from its engine box.

This was a ten metre rigid inflatable workboat, hugged by thick Hypalon tubes, rack-mounted dive tanks, metal-framed glass cabin stacked with flashy communications equipment, sonar heads and sampling gear, flanks splattered with yellow and orange *UHMT logos*, built to handle the roughest open-seas.

The crossing became a frenzied funfair ride – violent, nauseating, relentless – with the attendant lack of an exit.

Hairalt sat whistling, stoic, helmet on his lap; Nevena seemed more uncomfortable with Martin’s proximity than the waves.

Sandeep distracted himself by admiring Joe and Mr Fraser’s beards: one Zeus-like, streaky grey, soaking the rain like a sponge; the other trimmed, practical, both manly beards compared to his wispy, never-shorn effort. They stood at the open cabin, few words needed, steering into the storm’s teeth. Except... a finger thrust, an accentuating fist. They were locked in intense disagreement. Stiff backs kept their argument private. But Jean and Martin’s entire focus was the elder men. Keen to support Joe, their professional silence spoke more honourably than words.

Despite everyone too preoccupied to care, Sandeep untied his jura, pocketed the handkerchief, and retied his hair in a ponytail, yanking it against the rewrapped elastic band. It wasn’t his pagh’s loss. It didn’t hold any sentimental value like some, just an ordinary, working blue turban... though he hadn’t brought a spare. Just, he never went out in his jura. It triggered memories of childhood, time indoors with his family.

Trying to relax, he leaned back, elbows on the runner... a wave breaking against the pitching boat splashed across his face, filled his nostrils. He tipped forward, wiped it from his cheeks. The water felt different. Smelled metallic. Splashing in the hull... Jean’s warnings... *Should have signed those waivers.*

“Don’t look down.” Nevena’s calming voice in his ear. She locked elbows, pointing with her free hand at the castle. “Keep your eyes on that!”

Her kindness steadied him. He had a genuine fear of small boats. Not large ferries and such, just little boats, the way they pitched and yawed, the water so close, always threatening to flood in.

He tried to follow Mr Fraser's example, his eyes resolutely on his hotel, the beacon Joe steadfastly piloted to. In their fluorescent waterproofs, Jean and Martin seemed bound by a code of honour to be little impressed, chatting conspiratorially about more serious matters.

Instead of fixing on the castle, Sandeep found himself sizing up Martin. Broad-shouldered, thirty-something, plump cheeks that had never wanted for anything, the forced confidence of his eyes undermined by his right thumb, flicking against forefinger.

Through the maelstrom the tall, classic square fortress, a turret at every corner, floated tantalisingly closer, rising out of the loch on its improbable stone pedestal. Far bigger and imposing in 3-D reality than in any brochure. Either side of the south-west turret, two floor-to-ceiling glazed walls, triple-glazed with inch-thick glass, for maximum light and views from its primary guest lounge; its only visible modernity. Thin smoke from chimneys beyond the fortifications merged with the storm's lower layers. Magical to the eye despite the dispassionate sky.

When they neared enough to make out the silhouettes of Mrs Fraser and Sheona, the hotel's aristocratic landlady and her challenging daughter, peering from the castle's third floor, somewhere above his own room, Sandeep momentarily relaxed.

Lightning split the sky above the turrets, exposing the storm that devoured the entire valley. Thunder shattered the air instantly, making Nevena and Sandeep jump and flinch.

Bombastic lightning blazed twice more, as if proud Mother Nature protested the intrusion of their boat, threading its way through the perfection of her otherwise pure soul,

warning: *escape, go back, get off me, get out of me, while you can*, before... mercifully they reached the safety of the island's smaller jetty.

Immediately, Mr Fraser and Hairalt secured the RIB's mooring lines, opposite his smaller trio of classic motor launches, moored and bobbing the other side of the jetty.

Martin leaped across, helped a relieved Nevena out, then stepped aside to assist Joe, whose immediate concern was unloading the prow's containers onto the trolley.

Jean and the nonplussed Hairalt helped Sandeep, clutching his camera bag like a talisman, onto the swaying jetty alongside Nevena, and followed onto the shaking timbers.

The thunder still ringing in his ears, Sandeep heard giants howl. Just the circulating wind, trapped between the loch that had just released them, the hills beyond and the storm above, pelting rain in unpredictable sheets. Everything merged into one all-powerful, living organism.

Satisfied the UKHMT team no longer needed him, Mr Fraser disembarked their remarkable custom-vessel, the storm's violence just one more sodden day, and led Sandeep and Nevena up the island's slippery path.

chapter two
the painting

Castle Durann's entrance hall felt worlds away. Emergency exit lights cast long shadows across the token reception desk, behind which the hotel's distraught Spaniels barked. Insulated by the castle's stone walls, the storm shrank to muffled, accompanying percussion.

"They sound hungry." Nevena pocketed her waterlogged beanie and opened her overcoat.

"Yes ma'am, they do." Mr Fraser moved assuredly through the gloom, flicked non-working light-switches on and off. "Let me attend the electricity first..."

"I'll do Duchess and Briar, John." Hairalt placed his helmet on the desk. "After I say hello to Sheona. Or she'll go barking too."

Sandeep undid his camo-design parka, stained dark and dripping on the welcoming Axminster rug.

"No worry, I've a steamer for that." Mr Fraser picked up sharply, and melted into the shadows, calling over his shoulder, "Hairalt, be a good chap, our guests first, would you? We're having a trying evening."

"Yes, sir." Hairalt unzipped and examined his soaked jacket and riding boots.

"Mr Kapany!" Mrs Glory Fraser, the hotel matriarch, emerged from the lounge fast for her mid-sixties. Silver hair

pinned into a neat chignon, cream blouse's drooping bow under a fitted tweed jacket. The sight of Sandeep's ponytail seemed to break her cultured composure. "Oh my. You must see this. You too Miss Vancheva. Immediately. It's simply undeniable."

"If you don't mind, Mrs F." Hairalt kissed Mrs Fraser's cheek lightly.

"Of course, Hairalt," she pre-empted. "She's lighting their fires, rooms seven and nine."

Hairalt dipped his head to all three, slung his rucksack over a shoulder and, swinging his helmet, made for the stairwell.

"This way, Mr Kapany, please, Miss Vancheva." Mrs Fraser took their arms firmly, and led them into the grand lounge.

Fiery orange radiated from the central glass-enclosed circular fireplace. Without lights, the silver flue disappeared into the gloom of the five-metre ceiling.

Quick steps in knee-length skirt, Mrs Fraser near-dragged Nevena and Sandeep past sofas and chairs upholstered in quilted leather, arranged in intimate clusters.

Through the pair of glazed walls, heavy drapes either side; Joe, Martin and Jean hauled the containers on their trolley through the rain toward the hotel's entrance.

Mrs Fraser released Sandeep and Nevena at the opposite wall, hung with innumerable framed paintings, a trembling finger directed at one in particular. "It's undeniable."

In the weak firelight, they could make out Castle Durann but nothing remarkable.

"I do not...?" Nevena rubbed her temple as if a headache brewed.

"You'll see, Miss Vancheva." Mrs Fraser stepped back and clutched her delicate necklace, a golden Christ on the cross; a matching piece with her lapel's brooch, a rampant gold lion on her family crest.

“We’ll get these,” Joe commanded outside the doorway, grunts of effort as they wheeled their trolley through reception. “You get Freddie.”

Booted footsteps... Jean hurried in. “Tim? Freddie...?”

“Over here.” Timothy Crawford, defeated, barely audible, sat in the shadows beyond the hissing fire in an armchair by the glass wall. Three beer bottles on a coffee table next to him, Tim kept grim attendance over the inert figure of Freddie Steffensen, under a blanket on one of the room’s many sofas.

Crossing the lounge, Jean shed her hi-vis waterproof – heavy woollen pullover underneath – dropped it over the back of an armchair, and knelt beside Freddie in her slip-on over-trousers in one smooth motion.

Jean beside the sofa examining Freddie’s pulse, his breathing, Mrs Fraser drew their attention back to the painting.

“In all my life here, Miss Vancheva, Mr Kapany. We’ve never had this precise combination of people. Crossing. Together. With two coloured people. You’ll see, when John manages the generator.”

Two coloured people? Sandeep frowned, glad his expression couldn’t be read in the dark.

“Inverness it is,” Jean declared conclusively. “I can’t... we can’t risk, pulmonary inflammation.”

“Some-thing... in the... loch...” Freddie rasped, every syllable costing. “Feels like... ingested... napalm...”

“We’ll get on top of it, Freddie.” Jean held his hand, transferring positivity. Yet clearly she was tense, frightened.

The lights still out, Sandeep felt his pulse spike. He checked Nevena, who appeared equally unsettled.

“We’re a little soggy, Glory...” Joe apologised as he and Martin appeared in the doorway in their dripping hi-vis gear.

“My toolkit can’t deal with this, Joe,” Jean’s admission stopped them short. “We need Inverness.”

Joe glanced at Mrs Fraser and moved silently through.

“There time for a snack?” Martin waited by the doorway. “You know, just a haggis pie. Warm us up.”

Ignoring him, Joe stepped quickly to the sofa, his full state hard to read in the dimness.

“If Raigmore doesn’t CT-Scan... Fort William. The Belford.” Jean was strained. “The sooner the better.”

“Right you are,” Joe rumbled, instantly validating her judgement. A man stronger the quieter he spoke: “Martin. Prep the RIB.”

“No pie?” Martin lingered, his eyes finding Nevena.

She turned away. To Sandeep. The painting. Anywhere.

No reply forthcoming, one last glance at Nevena: “Be good.” Martin uncrossed his arms and disappeared.

“He has to go? Like, right now?” Sandeep heard himself ask.

“I’d like... to stay...” Freddie’s pained voice managed a hint of playful. “You’re... Pun-jabi... right?”

The observation unexpected, Sandeep stepped over.

“I’ll... see you...” Freddie extended his hand, “when I... get back.”

Sandeep took it. The cold startled him, the texture like shaking hands with a squid. He shuddered.

The main lights came on.

Freddie’s appearance stopped Sandeep’s breath.

Bloodshot eyes swollen against his wire-rimmed glasses. Small blue lesions across skin so pale it seemed translucent. Only his fastidiously trimmed beard was untouched. Last night at dinner he’d been as animated as any of them, holding court about marine biology. Now he couldn’t get his anorak on without Jean’s help.

In fact, Sandeep noted, lights on all of them looked shattered, as if none of them had slept for days.

“Joe... I know you got... the... boiler suits...” Freddie smiled, evidently a brave smile. “But don’t... let Martin... go down... please. Not till... I... get back.”

“Joe?” Jean interrupted, impatient.

“Don’t worry, Freddie.” Tim stood, emptied a beer bottle, set it back on the table. “I’ll handle Martin. Come on.”

Tim and Joe eased Freddie between them, an arm each over their shoulders.

“Jean... please. Keep a... record... everything.”

“I will. Stop vexing, Freddie.” Jean collected the blanket as they carried him toward the door, his feet dragging, and moved ahead to hold it wide. “I got it.”

Sandeep admired their coordinated teamwork: professional efficiency. His start-up winged it by comparison. Ambition, fluency weren’t enough. If they wanted to ride the third wave economy without wipeout, they needed better *teamwork* to coordinate the looming exponential learning curve...

“That... that is not possible,” Nevena declared. She examined the painting Mrs Fraser had been so insistent about. “This... it is... presentiment.”

With the lights on, Sandeep studied the painting alongside Nevena: the castle blazed with firelight, the chapel steeple rose impossibly tall, a rowboat crossed Loch Durann in a storm similar to that outside. It was the rowboat’s occupants that had got Mrs Fraser so excited: four white men, two bearded, two clean-shaven; two women, one white, one not; one non-white man, amazingly with a ponytail. Though all in Victorian clothing, he couldn’t disagree, broadly speaking, they were identical in

composition to their own crossing a short while ago: Mr Fraser, Joe, Hairalt, Martin, Nevena, Jean and himself.

Mrs Fraser, once sturdy from years of fine dining and the loch's energising fresh air, now shrinking with age and unspoken stresses, repeated self-consciously: "We've never had this... exact combination of guests cross my loch before. Together. Never. Not in all my years."

"That's a real corker out there, isn't it?" Mr Fraser loped back in, oilskin unbuttoned, revealing checked shirt and regimental striped tie.

"Freddie's real sick, John," Mrs Fraser told him directly. "They're taking him to Raigmore."

"They'll..." Mr Fraser scanned the lounge. "Then need a hand."

"John..." Mrs Fraser hurried to him.

"I want to leave too," Nevena cut in, trailing Mrs Fraser.

"Please, Miss Vancheva." Mr Fraser turned at the doorway. "Tomorrow. Please."

"John. I'm telling you." Mrs Fraser was deeply perturbed.

"Glory. Darling..."

"You do not understand!" Nevena demanded, "I want to leave, now! I will get my things. Five minutes..."

"Miss Vancheva!" Mr Fraser stood his ground. "I can't in good..."

"John! The painting..."

"Glory!" he snapped. "Joe wouldn't, if it wasn't necessary." He trailed off as he walked away. "I'll call when I get there."

Mrs Fraser's lips pressed thin. Without acknowledging Nevena's exchange with her husband, she moved back through the lounge toward the glazed wall.

"I keep telling you!" Nevena called from the doorway, and was gone.

Sandeep wasn't sure if Nevena meant him or Mrs Fraser. "See you, um... later?"

Mrs Fraser gazed out, absorbed in her own complexities. No doubt familiar with the odd 'challenging' individual over generations of guests, she'd seemed more perturbed by the painting than Nevena. She reminded Sandeep of his mum, when she had her darkest thoughts, but no one to articulate them to.

He stepped over, to ensure she was managing.

Outside, clearly visible under the floodlights, the loch's waves already claimed the island's hips. Martin waited in their RIB, ready to cast off. Jean raced down the jetty ahead of Joe and Tim, who shouldered Freddie, and spread the blanket on the seat. Mr Fraser followed in long strides down the slick path.

Mrs Fraser's knuckles tightened around her necklace.

They loaded Freddie however awkwardly in their bucking, rain-battered craft. Jean wrapped him. Jumped back out.

Mr Fraser climbed aboard, grabbing the inflatable torpedo's railings for support.

An argument erupted... Martin refusing to get out... everyone except Freddie protesting.

The jetty's length flexed as the impatient loch pounded its fragile timbers.

Tugging Martin's hi-vis, with Jean's help, Tim virtually dragged Martin offboard.

Joe opened up the twin outboards, reversed hard, swung them around.

They were off. The blunt-nosed canary RIB visible one moment, metal and glass reflecting the jetty's arc-lamps, swallowed by the rain and churning loch the next.

Sandeep exhaled. Safe in the lounge, his heart hammered.

Jean, Tim and Martin stood in the downpour, watching the flickering lights of their precious research vessel heave into the predatory waters. One by one, they retreated toward the hotel. Martin waved at them, watching from the lounge glazing, a grin across his smug...

“Jean knows what’s what.” Mrs Fraser mused to the glass, sleep-deprived grey eyes fixed on her husband in the ecologists’ boat struggling against the belligerent loch. “She’s a doctor. John’ll recommend the RAF, tremendously understanding, they’ll meet emergencies on the far side of bad weather. He’ll call from Gordon’s. Our telephones aren’t connecting. Often can’t reach anyone.”

“They’ll be fine,” Sandeep offered.

“Poor thing, Miss Vancheva,” Mrs Fraser whispered. “I get the distinct impression she... appreciates this castle better than most.”

“She thinks you’re haunted,” Sandeep joked.

Mrs Fraser turned, looked up, her eyes piercing. “You can’t have a building steeped in generations, without a few discontent spirits. Can you, Mr Kapany?”

The Golden Spaniels *howled* in the background. Nothing like their disciplined temperament this morning, when Mrs Fraser had ferried Sandeep and Nevena to shore. The dogs had sat sedately in the motor launch, eager for their morning rabbit chase through the ferns. Even Mrs Fraser, earlier an obdurate member of the landed gentry, in Burberrys and Wellingtons, capable of piloting a spitfire if needed let alone an overly varnished Riviera motorboat, now seemed a fragile pensioner.

“You have your room key, Mr Kapany?”

“I do.” He held up Room Seven’s key on its quaint wooden fob.

Mrs Fraser pulled herself away from the nightmare outside. “I simply must feed Duchess and Briar, before they eat each other.”

strawberry trees

“They’ll be fine. Out there, I mean. We’ll all be fine.”

“You have faith.” Mrs Fraser shuffled out, adding as she left, a trace of despair: “We had a good run.”

Stood alone, Sandeep contemplated her last words. Then especially what she said about Nevena: *She appreciates this castle.*

Halfway through the second Merlot last night, he’d found himself swooning over Nevena’s beguiling accent, intoxicated even by her mundane family anecdotes. Her mother a university lecturer, father a city planner, they’d sent Nevena to Edinburgh, her brother to New York, ostensibly to study, but in reality to safeguard against possible violent repercussions when Zhivkov inevitably collapsed. As during Ceaușescu’s overthrow. Thankfully, things had remained relatively stable during Bulgaria’s transition. Nothing like Yugoslavia’s break-up, the ten-day-war, and now, Croatia, Slovenia...

He’d listened, thinking wow, she knows her stuff. His reciprocations about the Punjab in the eighties were barely headlines.

Twenty-six. Less than six months between them. He’d caught himself smiling too readily. Attributing the impossibility of not admiring her to the heady wine, he’d deflected with dull tales of his own dysfunctional London family. Sidestepping his divorce.

This morning at breakfast, both too hungover for productive work, she’d suggested the mountain drive. Fresh air for her nagging headache. He’d concocted the need for photographs to supplement his IPO proposal. Readily available from their brochures, the simple truth was the notion of hanging with Nevena was... more fun.

Now though, he wondered if she wasn’t a little doolally.

Outside, the RIB had covered perhaps two hundred metres, still far from shore. Sandeep imagined Joe: a man you could rely on, shouldering the team's responsibilities, someone he should aspire to; stood firm against the wind, daring the storm to do its worst.

Mr Fraser. Tough on the surface, like Joe. Underneath... troubled. That regiment tie. The framed medals hanging in the bar. The *Konfrontasi* in Malaysia. Counter-insurgency in Aden.

The Punjab. Bulgaria. The Gulf. It never stopped.

Freddie. Poor Freddie. The blanket soaked within minutes, he'd be freezing...

"We're heading up." Tim appeared at the doorway, flushed as if drunk, Kenwood VHF radio raised in his hand. "This works best higher up." He was gone.

The rapturous central fire. The cosy sofas and armchairs. Three library-sized desks in front of countless shelves on the far wall, laden heavy with books and mementoes from decades of hoteliering. A million miles from the savage world outside. Barely twenty minutes since they'd crossed, and now they were crossing it again. Daft. And incredible.

Where was his Konica? Did he leave it on the boat...? It was slung over his shoulder. Daft ape. Almost panicked over nothing. Early dementia. He was just glad he hadn't dropped it in the loch along with his pagh. Must carry a spare. Even for weekends. Couldn't be so unprepared. Not now. Not with the IPO.

Key and camera bag in hand, he made to exit. Walking past the fireplace, a face with a wide leery smile flickered in the flames. Blinking away the illusion, he looked up.

Amid the coffered ceiling's ornate mouldings and cornices, an elaborate fresco in faux renaissance style depicted playful cherubs dressing elegant angels. A young satyr kicked his heels to a set of panpipes, tiger's teeth grinning the same leering

strawberry trees

smile that had vanished in the transient flames. His ruby-red devil's eyes stared directly back into Sandeep's.

He stood watching the fire, waiting for the illusion to reappear.

chapter three
binoculars and flares

The Spaniels barked continuously from behind the door beyond the reception desk. Sandeep took the stairwell, another steel and glass intrusion compared to the ancient walls, even with the fading Axminster runner. Given the grand tour yesterday, on his own the hotel felt unsettling. Still, Friday night usually meant Channel Four sitcoms. Even with canned laughter they always cheered him up.

On the second floor, brass-engraved signs indicated: 'BALLROOM', '<- Rms 7-9 : South Wing' and 'North Wing: Rms 10-12 ->'.
'

Along the corridor, windows every few metres overlooked the rain-bombarded central courtyard. Beyond the fire-exit set in the corner to the south wing, another engraved finger repeated, '<- Rms 7-9 : South Wing'.

Both given south-facing rooms, Nevena's room was further along. Eager for a glimpse of the boat's progress, Sandeep quickly reached Room Seven, key in hand.

The door was unlocked.

Sheona and Hairalt, jacket off but trousers and boots still on, occupied his bed, rumpled sheets beneath them. Flushed from their snogging, they broke apart the moment he entered.

"I was lighting your fire..." Sheona sprang up. "My mother and I, we saw you take a soaking."

True, the fire burned nicely, but her phrasing made Sandeep raise an eyebrow.

Nineteen-years-old, diamond nose stud catching the light, short, bleached-white hair accentuating her blushed cheeks. Cropped t-shirt, high-waisted tartan trousers, acid pink DM boots with Smiley Face on toecaps; Sandeep couldn't help but grin at her overflowing energy.

She tugged Hairalt's hand. "Get up, Scraggs!"

Hairalt stood slowly, bashful, shoved back his raven locks, smoothed the creases of his plain black sweat-shirt.

"My apologies, Mr Kapany." Sheona straightened the sheets, sounding just like her mother. "They're a little... damp. I can get you fresh..."

"They'll be fine." Sandeep shook his head.

"This is Hairalt. People call him Harold." Sheona pulled on her stripey pink mohair cardigan, shedding faintly. "My kinda fiancé. If he would make up his mind..."

"I'm the bother?" Hairalt collected his jacket, helmet and rucksack from the armchair. "We made introductions earlier. I'm sure he's wanting his room back now, Sheona."

Sheona took Hairalt's hand and led him out. "We do hope you enjoy your stay at Hotel Durann, Mr Kapany."

"Please. Sandeep." He studied the design on her t-shirt: a wonky, cross-eyed pagan warrior with horns, holding a long rune board and wonky staff.

"Sedition, Mr Sandip," she offered as if it explained everything. "Pink Turds in Space."

"Funky." Sandeep grinned wider. Then caught her grey eyes. Identical to Mrs Fraser's. Down to their bleary lack of sleep. *Was everyone an insomniac here?*

"Do call down, Mr Kapany." Sheona held his gaze a beat too long, possibly approving his ponytail. "Anything at all."

The swing of her arms as she swept out. She even walked like her mother. Hairalt dipped his head, his imperceptible bow, and closed the door behind them.

Sandeep savoured Room Seven's cossetting privacy. The antique fireplace radiated warmth. The grand four-poster, already proven irresistible. Modish wardrobes, armchairs and drawers. En-suite bathroom that barely impinged on the vast, oddly angular room, a hint of the turret curving in its distant corner. Two considerable, retro-styled sash-windows set in wide sills...

He dropped his camera bag on the bed, slung his damp parka over an armchair, and swiped clear a patch of condensation to peer through a window. Dead ahead, halfway to the car park, the single light on its prow revealed the twitching shadow of the RIB, wriggling onward through the tempest.

From the second floor the storm didn't seem so gruesome. For some. Freddie's illness must be desperate for them to risk *this*.

Moving to remove his damp clothes, Sandeep automatically went to remove his pagh... felt bare neck – remembered, the absence still jarring – and peeled off his jumper.

Safe on the bedside cabinet, his X-Vision prototype and Motorola MicroTAC lay on top of his PowerBook. He powered up the TAC and the prototype. It would combine the functions of both the other two, a portable computer's power and a mobile phone, in an eight-and-a-half by two-and-a-half package, target five hundred grammes. Every Director, Partner and Head of Department had a prototype, field-testing, under its four-and-a-half-inch touchscreen, the system board, ARM microprocessors, ROM and RAM, microphone, speaker, antennae, all integrated – *communicated* – via the pre-alpha software. If the spring IPO succeeded, and it had to, Sandeep Kapany, YOU will be *X-Vision Communications Ltd, CTO*.

Waiting for the Motorola and the prototype to power-up, he lifted the bedside cradle phone. No tone. Mrs Fraser had mentioned extreme weather knocking them out was standard.

Still waiting, he flipped on the kettle, set in a tray with teabags, coffee sachets and mini-packs of Royal Silver butterscotch biscuits. Opening the mini-fridge underneath, ignoring the dainty jug of fresh milk, replenished since yesterday, Sandeep scanned the generous collection of miniatures and mixers... settling on a Three Sisters single malt.

Tipping it into a tumbler from the tray, taking a swig, he grimaced approval, adding water like an uncle. He paced with it to the second window. Another swipe: the same struggling silhouette of the RIB. Barely any headway.

Checking the X and Motorola, the zero reception bars confirmed, as yesterday and this morning, Highland coverage was non-existent. He powered them down.

Glancing out the window again... the boat... was... gone?

Had the lamp blown?

Despite the rain, Sandeep slid up the window. And stared. Between the floodlights catching the water breaking over the island's stone perimeter and the car-park's faint distant arc lamp: nothing. Darkness.

Light spilled from a room directly above. An open window. Tim gripped his VHF radio alongside Martin. Beyond them, Jean's shocked face peered from a second window.

"Tim!" Sandeep yelled. "Where are they?"

Tim glanced down. Registered no surprise seeing him. Shrugged.

Sandeep hurried out. Down the corridor to the stairs. Through the distance, the Spaniels barked. Or it was his mind:

Three men are drowning! Three men are drowning! Call the navy. Someone. Do something! Anything!

On the top floor, he ran to the South Wing. Room Fourteen. Door open, Tim and Martin at one window, Jean the other. Gusts tore at sheets covering the furniture of the unoccupied, even larger presidential suite.

“If you hear me, *please* respond. Over.” Tim pressed the radio close, grimacing at the abrasive static. “Please, please respond. Over.”

Only white noise.

“Can we...” Sandeep stepped into the room. They noticed him. “Can we look from the roof?”

Jean turned from her search, agitated. Considered it. “We’d cover more area.”

Tim and Martin exchanged a look. Something unspoken between them.

“I’ll get the flares,” Martin stated.

“I’ll come with...” Jean started.

“I know where they are...” Martin objected.

“...see if their hotel’s boats are seawor...”

“Not in this weather.” Martin moved forward. Half-a-foot taller, he filled the space between them.

“I shouldn’t have made them go,” Jean agonised.

Martin blinked, caught by Jean’s shift of tone. “You didn’t make them go. That’s Joe’s decision.”

“We’ll see.” Jean turned away. “Let’s get those flares.”

Jean dashed out. Baffled, Martin stood rooted.

“You should go now, Martin,” Tim recommended.

Martin nodded, sniffed, and went after Jean.

Tim turned back to the rain-lashed window.

Sandeep took the second window, searching past the floodlit island into... nothing. Couldn’t see a damn thing.

Gaunt face under dirty blonde hair, dressed in his team’s orange Gore-Tex, Tim looked an unlikely ecologist.

“What’s Jean mean?” Sandeep ventured. “She shouldn’t have made them go?”

Tim wiped his brow with his sleeve. “She didn’t think Freddie’d make it. Raigmore. Or Belford.”

“Shit, so...” Sandeep couldn’t finish it: *Had the others lost their lives attempting to save a dying man?*

“Still doesn’t mean...” Tim stared back out. “Fuck it! This is so fucked up.”

Tim clocked the mini-fridge. Staggered toward it, radio in one hand, binoculars on his chest. “That RIB’s designed to cope with anything. Any weather. It wasn’t overloaded. I’ve been there.” He checked the fridge. Empty. Slammed it shut. “Fuck it!”

Sandeep changed tack. “How’d Freddie get so sick?”

“We went diving this morning, peak of the loch. North bank.” Tim sank back on the windowsill, fingers tapping the VHF. “Same place Martin found the mutated bryozoa...”

“Bryo-what?”

“Bryozoa.” Tim checked Sandeep, recalibrated. “A moss.” He raised his binoculars and scanned. “It’s the only bloody thing we’ve found since we got here.”

“Moss.”

“No fish. No water beetles. Nothing. Fucking weird.” He lowered the binoculars. “Martin and Jean went to St Andrews, Joe’s gaff. Picked up offshore dive gear Joe’d requisitioned... his mates actually, the Oceans Institute. Get to the loch’s deeper parts.” Tim’s voice dropped. “Freddie was pissed off, see. He couldn’t identify the Bryozoa. And if Freddie didn’t know it, nor do all the mainframes in all America. He sussed it on the sofa. No one could have recognised it. It’s a mutation.”

“Mutation...?”

“Yeah. They’re normally a few inches long.” Tim glanced back at the fridge. “The one Martin found was over three feet. Freddie reckoned it developed an independent filtration

system... evolved to thrive on what killed everything else. He went down alone, Freddie, looking for more specimens. He's a proper PADI diver, qualified, knows the biz. But after, when he surfaced, he said the lakebed was *shifting*. Rocks, soil, everything. Stirring. The current dragged him off." Tim pinched his nostrils. Took a breath. "Joe and me examined the equipment after. His air tank line had... Christ, it was *melted*. He must've swallowed *mouthfuls* of whatever's fucked the lake."

"Jean's a doctor, right?"

"Yeah. Joe's Scottish Fisheries. He's known Loch Durann, the Frasers, forever. He brought us in, UK Hydrological Trust, cos they couldn't figure it out. Freddie, Martin, Jean, they're specialists, sure, but they're aqua microbiologists. Saltwater. Freshwater. Martin's... not as dumb as he looks. Me? I'm their techie. Monitoring, recording electronics, dive gear. This useless shit..." Tim held up the VHF radio. Paused. "Thing is... and he was sick, real sick... you saw him, God knows what internally... he kept babbling, *the loch is metamorphosising*..."

"Meta-morpho-sising...?" Sandeep stared at Tim.

Jean pushed back in, waterproofs dripping, hair flat to her skull. "See anything?"

Tim shook his head.

"Their boats'll float, but I wouldn't hazard they'd cope." She held up a half-dozen yellow flare sticks. "Tim, keep looking from here till the first one's up. You... grab those if you're coming." She indicated a hi-vis top and binoculars draped across a chair-arm. And went.

Sandeep nodded to Tim, grabbed the gear, and followed. "Jean! You know the way up?"

Jean slammed back the fire-exit in the corner. Sandeep considered propping it open with an extinguisher, except yesterday's tour: inner fire-exits had safe access both ways from all floors. He hurried on after Jean down a narrower, half-lit corridor.

"Jean, what did Freddie mean?" Sandeep caught up. "The loch's *metamorphosing*?"

"Metamorphosing," she corrected, paused, measured him up. "This is confidential, tween us, understand?" She ran on, clarifying over her shoulder. "He was convinced, six months, this'd be nothing but marshland. Except, most marshes, there's something... rodents, beetles, sedges. Here, there'd be nothing."

Jean shoved open the turret fire-escape, gripped the frayed red hawser threaded through rusting iron hooks, and hauled herself up the stone steps spiralling around the central granite pillar.

"But... *metamorpho-sing*...?"

"The moss we found." She climbed fast, spitting words between breaths. "Offshoot, Phylacto-laemata strain. Had to practise that. Its *zooids*, structures it uses to filter-feed, mutated. Countered, thrived even, on what killed everything else. It was almost a metre..."

"Thrived? How?"

"I don't know!" she snapped. "I'm not Freddie."

A simple wooden door at stairwell's top. Jean tugged barrel bolts free. Shouldered it open... rain and wind detonated inward. Sandeep stepped back in the doorway, fumbled on the borrowed jacket. Jean reached across him, flicked a switch.

Electric light pierced the storm. Arc lamps suspended from ornate iron posts blazed across the massive flat roof, sheets of rain cascading through their glare. Pitch black beyond, the posts fenced the castle's perimeter walls, framed the shadowy maw of the courtyard, and lit up the chapel spire rising above the

East wing thirty, forty feet, topped by its cockerel-with-a-sword weathervane.

And it bucketed down.

Jean stood by the crenellated wall, tucking all but one flare into inside pockets. Beside her, the sight took Sandeep's breath clean away. The castle was far taller from up here; inversely, the islet looked impossibly small. And beyond its craggy edges, barely defined by the floodlights: nothing. Absolute darkness.

Leaning over the parapet, the castle's saturated stonework gleamed black. One floor below, Tim's straggling hair and radio antennae jutted from Room Fourteen's window.

Jean stepped back from the wall. "How keen's your eyesight?"

"It's excellent."

"Get ready." She removed a red plastic safety cap, held the flare at arm's length, yanked the ignition cord.

It exploded – a compressed bang – and rocketed straight up in a plume of sparks and smoke. Sandeep jumped back from the stench of sulphur, looked up, and caught the flare consumed by the belly of the storm. Instantly gone.

Jean barely paused. Drew another. Assessed the angle. Aimed for the distant car park. Pulled. The flare erupted, flew like a Guy Fawkes rocket, and hung just below the cloud base, a brilliant point of light drifting in the wind like a suspended star.

"We got max, half a minute a pop." Jean raised her binoculars and swept the churning waves lit by the flare.

Foolishly having watched its ascent, retinas burned with afterimage, Sandeep lost precious seconds readjusting before seeing anything through the binoculars. Then still nothing. No boat, no crew, no fluorescent lifejackets bobbing in the luminous waves.

Sandeep felt completely out of his depth. Utterly hopeless. What was he doing in the Highlands, when even sitting

in a Glasgow pub still felt exotic. There was only one place he felt truly at one: Balham. His ex had ruined that...

“I can try from there?” He pointed at the turret below the steeple.

“Go for it!” Jean approved. “And don’t fall over! We’ve got enough probs!”

Sandeep crossed the South Wing’s flooded roof. Over his shoulder, the flare illuminated just how violent, how malicious the waves were. And the second flare died.

A weekend break. That’s all this would be. Business. An incidental pleasure. Peace and quiet. Not dead bodies in a loch so polluted even the rats had migrated...

He stumbled.

Nearly went down. A long steel ladder lay across the roof. Jean hadn’t been joking about falling.

Back at the first turret, Jean readied another flare. Martin and Tim in their hi-vis kit had joined her.

The third flare arced across the sky at an even shallower angle. This time Sandeep could see as far as the car park, over a mile south. The ecology team’s white van lay on its side like a dead animal.

He reached the next corner turret; like the others, five metres in diameter, chest-high crenellated wall, another hut with a door he presumed led to another fire-escape. Access to the next turret via a narrow walkway alongside the chapel’s impinging pyramidal spire.

Sandeep stood by the turret’s wall for maximum visibility, and lifted the pointless binoculars.

The same wherever he looked: between island and hills, the loch’s raging, homicidal waves.

Jean, Tim, Martin and he took one turret each. Positioned at each castle corner they scrutinized as much of the loch as possible. The flares went up one by one, brilliant and brief. Regardless of what they wished, they discovered sweet FA.

Several times he thanked God Mr Fraser had stopped Nevena joining them on that cursed boat. Then checked himself for evoking the word 'God'. He wore a pagh, kept his beard – out of respect for his parents, his upbringing – but stood next to the spire, he'd long discarded *that* kind of God. A benign, omnipotent, *invisible guy in the sky*. The kind that permitted, or indeed facilitated, such pointless tragedies.

Sandeep searched until his fingers went numb around the binoculars. They spotted nothing. Not wreckage. Not lifejackets. Half-an-hour since the boat vanished, more than enough to convince, while trying to do something constructive, they were avoiding reality. Nobody could have survived that deranged loch. Three men had drowned.

Long after the last flare died, Sandeep stared senselessly at the same patch of black water. It was the loch that had capsized the boat. Not the storm. Not human error. The *loch itself*, dying, metamorphosing, whatever the ecologists named it. *The loch had claimed them.*

Martin's tap on his shoulder made him jump.

About the Author

Balbeer Bahi is a London-Slough-Punjabi novelist, scriptwriter, filmmaker and director.

Working in theatre many decades, Balbeer formed *The Storytelling Machine*, which specialised in entertaining school children (with the secret agenda of encouraging their natural delight in reading, and writing stories of their own).

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