

‘**W**here is he?’ asked Duffer.

Kookla was lying with her back on the floor. She didn’t respond. Instead, she focused her attention on Luigi, the black rabbit who rested quietly on her chest. She adjusted her position slightly in order to accommodate the rabbit’s weight and released a rolling nickel from her pant pocket. The nickel meandered across the studio floor. Duffer stamped a foot over it.

‘Listen,’ he said. ‘I need to find Robin.’

Kookla ignored him. Duffer sat down cross-legged on the floor opposite her. She pulled down on the rabbit’s soft ears.

‘Before I came in I overheard you talking with somebody,’ Duffer continued. Kookla’s bottom lip trembled. ‘Were you talking with Robin? Did he call you?’ She stroked the rabbit’s downy fur until its tiny pink eyes blinked slowly to sleep. ‘Maybe you were talking to yourself ... or maybe to Luigi?’

‘Go away,’ she said.

‘Not until you help me find Robin.’

Kookla tipped her head to one side and looked at Duffer. Her eyes were different colours. One iris was green and the other blue. The lids were moist but he didn’t think she’d been crying. She watched him with little interest. He feigned indifference and occupied himself with a button on his overcoat.

‘My friend who works security at the hospital caught Robin stealing from the antiquary,’ Duffer said. Kookla looked surprised.

‘Robin got away but my friend had to notify the police. I just wanted to let him know that the police might be looking for him.’

‘When did this happen?’

‘About a week ago.’

‘Why are you telling me now?’

‘Because I just found out about it.’

Kookla frowned and looked at the studio clock. It was on a table next to an aquarium that held a pile of water toys and a giant goldfish named Attila. The clock’s display was flickering 2:04 a.m.

‘Why are you telling me this at two in the morning?’ she glared. Her tone awakened Luigi. He sat up, sniffed the air and lay down with his head on Kookla’s shoulder.

‘You can turn off the high beams,’ he said. ‘I’m leaving.’ Duffer unfolded his legs and raised himself off the floor. ‘I thought this was important.’ He turned his back to Kookla and opened the door.

‘Before you go I want to ask you something.’

Duffer released the door handle and looked at her.

‘What would you have done if Autumn was here?’

He thought for a moment. ‘Are you and Autumn back together?’

Kookla pressed a cheek into Luigi’s fur. The pressure released a thread of tears into the soft pile of his winter coat.

The Coat Check Diner was open twenty-four hours a day and was situated in the city’s industrial west end. Autumn had learned that he could sit in a booth for hours so long as he continued to order fresh coffees. It was two in the morning. The waitress had served him his last cup of coffee at midnight. Autumn stretched out his legs and relaxed into the wounded red vinyl of the seat. The formica table surface, slick to the touch, allowed his mug to slip from hand to hand without disturbing the level of the coffee.

Autumn dipped his head toward the mug and took a sip. The coffee was cold. He had been sitting there for a long time.

The table was dressed with a ketchup bottle, salt and pepper shakers, a metal napkin dispenser and a paper menu. Autumn removed a black pen from his shirt pocket and doodled on the menu. The waitress walked over and asked if he needed anything else.

‘No thank you,’ he said.

The waitress ripped a bill from her pad and placed it face down on the table. She stood there for a moment and looked at his drawing. ‘Don’t write on the menu,’ she told him.

‘He is much with a bad habit,’ said a voice.

Igor was standing next to the table. His pockmarked face was smiling. A smoking cigarette was hanging from his lip.

‘Do you want to order something?’ asked the waitress.

‘No,’ replied Igor. He sat down in the booth facing Autumn and searched the table for an ashtray. The waitress retrieved a brimming ashtray from a nearby table and walked away.

‘Thank you, Miss,’ he called after her.

Igor had immigrated from a riverside Latvian town named Riga. He had worked there as a mechanical engineer developing gasoline-efficient tractor engines. Later on, with the assistance of a grant from his polytechnical institution, he developed an inexpensive high-caloric ceramic engine. At the age of thirty-four, after he had attained a full professorship, he moved to North America. Unfortunately, the universities and industries he approached refused to acknowledge his credentials. He was, however, qualified to work as a garage mechanic. Igor worked in various grease pits for several years until he had saved up enough money to open his own garage. He had met Autumn through Kookla when she had worked in his garage.

‘Breakfast?’ Igor asked. He tapped his cigarette ash into the ashtray. He was wearing a pair of brown gloves. The first and second fingers of the glove were nicotine stained.

‘No, just a coffee. It’s too early for breakfast.’

‘I had breakfast here before,’ he said. ‘A soft-boiled egg.’ He stopped and motioned for Autumn to move in closer. ‘It was too soft ...’ Igor removed his gloves. The fingernails were nicely manicured although residue from the oil pans had discoloured them. Again, the first and second fingers were stained with nicotine. ‘I knocked the little cap off my egg with a spoon and looked inside.’ His hands reproduced the tableau with puppet-show enthusiasm. ‘And what do you think I found?’ Autumn shrugged. ‘The white of the egg was not yet cooked and in the middle of the yellow ... it was alive.’ Autumn frowned. ‘For long time I watched this beating heart inside egg. It ticked away breakfast time. Such a funny thing to happen, don’t you think, how heart survived hot water?’ Autumn nodded.

Igor then associated the very soft-boiled egg with an article he had written for *The Journal of Science*. It was a prospectus on the development of a friction-free glass engine with a double atrium and ventricle system. Autumn listened carefully. Igor understood that his friend was just being polite.

‘I am leaving,’ Igor said. He inhaled the last breath of his cigarette and drilled out the butt. He then put his gloves on and stood up from the table. ‘Please give my love to Kookla.’

‘I will the next time I see her.’

Igor tightened his scarf around his neck. ‘The next time you see her? Are you no longer together?’

‘It’s hard for me to say.’

Igor settled back into the seat. ‘What happened?’

Autumn resumed his doodling. ‘I don’t really know.’

‘So where are you to stay?’

Autumn shook his head. ‘I can’t stay with Kookla ... not after tonight.’

‘Then you are to stay with me,’ he said. ‘I am to insist.’

Autumn looked up from his drawing. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Do not be an idiot.’ Igor lifted Autumn’s coat from off the boothside hanger. ‘Here,’ he said, throwing the coat onto Autumn’s lap. ‘Let’s go.’

Autumn smiled. ‘Where are we going?’

‘First we are to make with a prits.’

‘To make with a what?’ Autumn capped his pen and placed it in his shirt pocket.

‘A *prits*, it is the same as a *banya* ... no, the word *banya* is in Russian. How do you say a word in English for where men go to make a steam?’

‘A steam bath?’

‘Yes.’

‘How are we getting there?’

‘*Skaistā temprementāla cēla mīlākā*. The Beautiful and Temperamental Mistress of the Road,’ he translated.

‘Oh no,’ recalled Autumn. ‘That car almost got me killed.’

‘No, it did not.’

‘Well, it almost got me arrested.’

‘When is this?’

‘Almost a year ago. It was late at night – you offered me a lift back to my studio, and then you made me stand lookout while you stole parts from parked cars.’

‘I remember this now,’ laughed Igor. ‘You were very upset.’

‘I was upset because the police started chasing us.’

‘But we got away.’

‘We got away because you smashed your car into the police cruiser.’

‘My friend,’ he smiled, ‘such an accident is on purpose. The Mistress is too slow to make away from a police cruiser. That is why instead of accelerating forward I had to reverse my beautiful girl into police car. The terrible crash was to make for the airbags to explode. *Boom!* The police car cannot drive and the police cannot get out of car.’

Autumn stood up from the booth and flipped over the bill. He put some money on the table. 'While the cops struggled and swore and tried to get out of their car you just stood there and finished your cigarette.'

'They were not hurt.'

'They were not happy.' Autumn put on his coat. 'Tell me something. It's pretty early in the morning – are you awake at this hour to go and steal car parts?'

'I am finished for stealing car parts this morning,' he admitted. 'Come.' Igor swept his arm around Autumn's shoulders. 'Let's go.'

'Let's go,' said Robin, his hand guiding Mr Zaretsky's elbow. 'Your room is at the other end of the corridor.' The wandering resident let go of the fire-door handle and accompanied Robin. They shuffled through the nursing home together like an old married couple.

'Do you need a hand?' shouted Connie. She was in the middle of reviewing her nursing notes.

'No, I've got him.'

Robin helped Mr Zaretsky back into his bed. He covered his body with a comforter and made certain to raise the protective bedside railings. He also checked on the other residents. There were four men in the room and they were all sleeping soundly. Before leaving the room, Robin approached Mr Ramos in bed number two and rolled the sleeping resident onto his left side. Mr Ramos had to be turned every two hours in order to prevent pressure sores. Robin walked out from the room and closed the door. Connie was waiting for him at the nursing station.

'Is everything all right?'

‘Yeah,’ he said, ‘everything’s fine.’ Robin sat down on a metal frame chair and took off his glasses. He rubbed his tired eyes. They felt like burned-out light bulbs in rusty sockets. ‘How long have you worked here?’ he asked.

Connie put down her notebook and tucked her hands into the pockets of her cardigan. ‘Do you mean on the neuro-psychiatric floor?’

‘Yes.’

‘Five years.’

‘What did you do before this?’

‘I was a community service nurse in Trinidad.’

‘Did you enjoy your work?’

‘Yes, very much.’

‘Did you work alone?’

‘No, there were six of us. We would walk from our central health station to the different townships. When we arrived, the people would line up for us to check their blood pressure and sugar level. Along the way, depending on the season, we would find lovely sweet mangos and cashew fruits and avocados to eat.’ Connie clapped her hands together and laughed. ‘And we would gossip.’

‘What brought you here?’

Connie stopped laughing. She quietly surveyed the fluorescent lighting, the uncomfortable chairs, the hard melamine surfaces. ‘Opportunity.’

Robin put his glasses on and nodded.

‘You’ve been here a year – are you happy?’ she asked.

‘No.’

‘What did you do before this?’

‘Before I was a health-care aide?’

‘Yes.’

‘I was in health care.’

‘I’m surprised that you don’t like your work. You seem to have a good understanding of the residents. In fact, the ones under your care seem to be improving.’

'For example?'

'Mr Zaretsky – he used to fall down all the time and now he's wandering the building without any assistance.'

'He was falling down because of a medication error.' Robin reached over to the medical records and withdrew a large plastic binder with 'Zaretsky' on the spine.

'What are you doing?'

'I'll show you,' he said.

'You can't look at the residents' medical records – they're confidential.'

'Here,' pointed Robin. He had opened the chart to the doctor's orders section. 'Dr Adler discontinued the Haldol about a month ago and switched him to Risperdal.'

Connie took the chart and examined the order.

'He was falling down because of the extrapyramidal side effects of the Haldol.'

'The what?'

'Mr Zaretsky has Parkinson's disease. The Haldol made his symptoms worse. If you look in the pharmaceutical compendium you'll see that Haldol is contraindicated in Parkinson's.'

'I think something is wrong here,' she said.

'What?'

'This isn't Dr Adler's handwriting.'

'Are you sure?'

'I've worked here long enough ...'

Robin shrugged.

'Your other patient, Mr Ramos, how come he's so quiet all of a sudden?'

'I'm not sure what you mean. He's always been quiet. The last stroke left him aphasic.'

'I mean, why is he so different over the last week? He isn't fighting with the staff. He isn't crying. He suddenly seems to have settled in better.'

'Don't ask me.'

Connie reviewed the doctor's orders pages in the Ramos chart. She would occasionally look up from the chart and meet eyes with Robin. There had been no medication changes noted for several months.

'I'm going to finish my rounds.' Robin pushed himself out of the chair. As he walked toward the recreation area he glanced back at Connie. She had removed several of the medical folders from their shelves and stacked them in a pile. The charts belonged to Robin's section of the ward.

The recreation area was a large empty room surrounded by geriatric chairs. Robin walked across the room directly to the upright piano. He lifted its lid and put his hand inside the casing. The smell of woodworm killer wafted out from the inside of the instrument. His fingers searched the back frame ribs until he found the plastic bag. Robin removed the bag, closed the lid, placed the stolen bundle in his pocket, and left the room without a trace.

Kookla traced a leaf of lettuce across Luigi's nose. His chewing noises reminded her that Attila the goldfish also needed feeding. Kookla went to the aquarium and opened a plastic container. The fish food smelled like sea water and looked like pencil shavings. 'I can't stand Duffer,' she thought to herself. She milled the material between her thumb and index finger while Duffer watched. He sat on the hammock like a kid on a swing. Kookla peppered the top of the fish tank with the food and waited until Attila emerged from the hull of a sunken model ship. His kissing face gathered the sinking particles. 'There you go, fatty,' grinned Kookla. After sealing the container she sat back down on the floor.

Once, every so often, Kookla allowed herself the indulgence of a favourite little game. She would identify a target, draw a circle

around it with her mind, and then remove its gravity. The object would suddenly hurtle skyward. When it struck the limits of the atmosphere it would shrink into nothing and finally disappear. A tiny white flare might appear for an instant. She focused this circle around her friend Duffer.

‘Why are you smiling?’ he asked.

‘No reason.’

He stretched out on the hammock and waited. They hadn’t spoken for an hour. Duffer brushed a foot against the floor and started the hammock rocking.

Kookla focused on Attila. He was drifting near the bottom of the tank behind a belching clam shell water filter. She had received the fish as a present from Duffer. That was six months ago, when she and Duffer had joined Autumn for supper.

Autumn had suggested a Chinese restaurant down the street from his studio. When they arrived at the restaurant a smiling hostess greeted them and led them to a table. Along the way they had to pass over a miniature bridge. Its columns were decorated with golden dragons and its canopy was hung with paper lanterns. Underneath the bridge was a penny-scattered fish pond. Kookla halted in the middle of the bridge and leaned over the railing. She stood there for a while watching the swimming goldfish.

At the end of the meal, while Autumn was disassembling his paper drink umbrella for the Chinese newspaper inside, Duffer called for the waiter. He whispered something into the waiter’s ear. The waiter nodded, looked sideways at Kookla and then hurried off.

‘What are you up to?’ she asked.

‘None of your business.’

A few minutes later the waiter returned and presented Kookla with a large bottle of Chinese cooking wine. Kookla stopped crunching the bits of her fortune cookie and stared at the waiter.

‘What is this?’

'It's for you,' explained Duffer.

Kookla took the bottle.

'Oh my god!' she exclaimed. 'There's a goldfish inside!'

It took Autumn almost two weeks to find a decent-sized aquarium. In the meantime the goldfish, whom she had decided to name Attila, seemed perfectly happy inside his wine bottle. Kookla fed him a single pinch of fish food every day and delighted in his healthy growth. On the day of Attila's transfer to the fish tank, after the water had gushed out of the bottle, the goldfish got stuck. Attila was too big to slip through the neck of the decanter. The three of them stood there speechless. The poor fish, they realized, had gotten too fat.

Duffer reached for a mallet but Kookla slapped his hand away. She refused to consider this option. The same thing applied to not feeding the fish, shaking him out ketchup style and cracking the bottle with heating and chilling. Kookla and Duffer were out of ideas. Autumn ran into the kitchen. He returned with a crooked smile and a white plastic drinking straw. His intention was to increase the air pressure behind the fish.

Autumn reclined in the bathtub. He inserted the straw in the neck of the bottle and gave Kookla and Duffer a thumbs-up. Then, after a series of deep breaths, he tipped the bottle upside down and started blowing. Water poured onto his chest. The fish dropped down and plugged up the shoulders of the bottle. Autumn tried blowing harder. A pocket of air began to expand behind the fish. And slowly, very slowly, the fish began to enter the neck of the bottle. Kookla started clapping her hands. Autumn kept blowing until he nearly passed out. He finally gave up with a gasp.

'What happened?' she asked.

'I couldn't blow any harder.'

The problem, according to Autumn, involved the airway. The fish's body, as it entered the neck of the bottle, collapsed the plastic drinking straw and cut off the necessary air supply.

What they needed, he reasoned, was a method of generating continuous air pressure behind the fish. Autumn refilled the bottle with water and returned it to Kookla.

The three of them sat on the hardwood floor and listened to the bubbling of the empty aquarium. Kookla stared at the stranded fish. She then stared at Autumn. The front of his shirt was dripping wet and his pants were soaked. Kookla had an idea. She whispered something into Autumn's ear. He looked surprised, but he reached into his back pocket and produced a small shining square of foil. Kookla took the package, broke its seal and removed a condom. Duffer shook his head in dismay.

Kookla carefully unrolled the condom, then got a box of baking soda and a jug of white vinegar from the kitchen. She heaped some baking soda inside the condom and twisted it tight. Then she added, above the baking soda, a portion of vinegar. With the ingredients in place she knotted the condom, stuffed it inside the bottle and called out, 'Bombs away!' The depth charge sank to the bottom of the bottle. Attila floated above it. A few seconds later the twist in the condom unwound and the contents mixed. The resulting CO₂ gas quickly inflated the condom and displaced the water from underneath the fish. Water started to trickle from the bottle's mouth. The fish's helpless face and bulging eyes narrowed through the neck. Suddenly, Attila popped out of the bottle and landed on the floor. Kookla shrieked and rushed to scoop him up and drop him into the aquarium. The goldfish wasn't moving. She turned away and closed her eyes.

But Attila's gills and fins began to stream. 'I think he's moving,' said Duffer. The three of them watched as he eventually regained his bearings. At first he flitted back and forth against the glass, but soon he was paddling around the aquarium like the Grand Marshall of the goldfish parade.

'Hello ... hello ... ' repeated Duffer. He was sitting on the hammock waiting for Kookla to respond. She just sat on the floor

and stared at the goldfish. Duffer unbuttoned his overcoat. The studio was getting hot and he wanted to leave.

Kookla turned away from the goldfish. 'What do you want?'

'I want to find Robin.'

'Is that really what you want?'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean maybe you're here because you know that Robin is gone and Autumn is gone and you wanted to find me alone.'

Duffer was perspiring.

'Sit down beside me,' she said.

Duffer removed his overcoat. The sleeves fell from his arms like overcooked meat from a bone. He sat down beside Kookla.

'I know where to find Robin.'

'Tell me,' he said.

'First you need to convince me.'

'Convince you of what?'

'That you won't hurt Robin.'

Duffer abandoned the conversation. He reached for his overcoat as if it were a parachute. Kookla took hold of his wrist. 'Do you really want to help Robin?' she asked.

'I want to help Robin,' he said. 'What do I have to do to convince you?'

Kookla thought for a moment. 'Why don't we start with a bus ride?'

'The ride to the steam bath was not so bad,' said Igor. He was naked except for a white cotton towel around his shoulders and a pair of plastic sandals. 'Give me your clothes.' Autumn was sitting on a wooden bench with a towel around his waist. He handed Igor his clothing.

'Your car has no heat.'

Igor removed a disposable razor from his locker. He then stuffed Autumn's clothing into the narrow cubicle and forced the door closed. 'Don't you have to lock it?' asked Autumn.

'It is unnecessary,' Igor replied.

The steam bath was in the basement of an old utilities building. Members had to walk to the rear of the building, descend a flight of concrete steps and open a metal door. An attendant behind the door buzzed them in. He sat at a desk with a book, a portable heater and a large checkered thermos. Igor had explained to the attendant that Autumn was his guest. They argued in Latvian. The attendant crossed his arms and looked at his thermos. Igor put some money into the thermos.

As they walked from the change room to the showers they passed a number of different rooms. One contained a set of free weights and a medicine ball. This room was unoccupied. Another room contained a man with black goggles roasting under a sun lamp. The last room contained a group of several men, most of them naked, playing card games and backgammon and chess. They were sitting at fold-out tables and drinking hot tea from styrofoam cups. A grey-haired woman with a white apron circulated among them. She was carrying a tray of small glasses half-filled with a dark liquid.

'Is Melnais Balzams,' pointed Igor. Autumn didn't understand. 'Traditional Latvian alcohol, black medicine, made from bitter roots and herbs. The taste is very terrible – like pitch for mending tire.'

The shower facilities were very basic. The plumbing for the fixtures was exposed – galvanized steel with hot- and cold-water taps and lime buildup at the joints. Autumn lathered up with an industrial-smelling soap and rinsed off. During the shower he could see that Igor had thick, ropy scars on his ankles and knees and that his left hip was discoloured from a skin graft. Igor had always maintained that he was never at fault for the spectacular car accidents that caused them, and he insisted that if it weren't

for his beautiful and temperamental vehicle he would be either dead or in a coma. He considered this a blood tie with his car and claimed that he would never drive another vehicle.

Autumn understood this tie and when, as a favour to Igor, he painted a sign on the front door of his garage, he combined Igor's face with the demolished body of the Mistress. The vehicle resembled Igor, held an ice pack to a throbbing red bump on its roof, and smoked a broken cigarette. Igor loved the painting so much he kissed Autumn on both cheeks after the unveiling.

After the shower they walked to the steam room. A fat man with a beard stepped in front of Igor. The man was rubbing the top of his bald head with a towel. He was naked except for a heavy gold watch on one wrist, a gold bracelet on the other, three gold chains with medallions around his neck, and at least three gold rings on each hand. He smiled at Igor with gold-capped teeth. Igor did not return the smile. He and the fat man started to quarrel. Their voices intensified as they moved in closer together. There was a great deal of gesturing and chest expanding. Suddenly the fat man reached down and feigned a grab at Igor's testicles. Igor laughed and drew back slightly. The fat man kissed his knuckles and uttered what must have been a threat. In response Igor raised his plastic razor and waved it in the man's direction. They parted on good terms.

'What was that all about?'

Igor opened the door to the steam room and ushered Autumn inside.

'That is Gregor,' he said. 'He is a car thief.'

The sauna was shaped like a rectangular theatre with three tiers of seating. The temperature inside was blistering hot and Autumn could feel his skin layers separate. A rumbling sound from the underground boilers, like the passage of a subway train, permeated the choking atmosphere. A red-skinned man reclined on the third tier. Igor greeted him with a 'sveiks.' The man nodded hello and slid over to one side. Igor sat down beside him

and started inhaling and exhaling steadily through his mouth and nose. With his third respiration he started to cough. The coughing progressively worsened until Igor had to stand up, lean forward and clear his throat into his towel.

‘Oh.’ He sat down. ‘The wet steam is very good.’

‘This is unbearable,’ said Autumn. He sat down on the first tier and scalded his ass on the tiles.

‘Gregor is an excellent car thief.’ Igor wiped the sweat from his face and his neck and started shaving. ‘But I do not wish to work with him and that is why he is for grabbing my balls.’

‘How do you know him?’

Igor tapped his razor on the edge of the tile bench. ‘I know him from before. He purchased the crashed cars from my garage. He would switch the inspection numbers from a crashed car with a stolen car. This it would make the stolen car legitimate.’

‘You were aware of this?’

‘No.’ Igor stopped shaving and rubbed a swollen ankle. ‘I became suspicious later when he asked me to repair the strip-and-runs.’

‘What’s a strip-and-run?’

‘It is when a thief strips a car of its valuables and leaves the stolen car for police to find. When police find car they make the chassis for an auction. The thief he buys the chassis, which is not so registered as stolen, and builds the car back together. It is very clever.’ Igor massaged his sore ankle. ‘Fuck it, this pain!’ he said.

‘What’s the matter?’

‘I am with these metal screws in my ankles. It is from the surgeries. If I am in the sauna for too long the metal gets burning.’ Igor pointed at a metal bucket on the floor. ‘Go please to make with the ice water from the faucet.’

Autumn crouched beside the faucet and turned the squeaking valve. ‘Why don’t you steal cars for Gregor?’ he asked. A gush of icy water poured into the bucket.

‘Please make it to the top,’ he said.

Autumn passed the bucket up to Igor. He steadied the bucket by holding onto the rim with one hand in the water. His fingers felt like they were caught in a mousetrap. 'Be careful,' he said, 'it's biting cold.'

Igor dipped his hand into the bucket and wet his ankles. 'Ah,' he said, 'is much better.' He wet his knees and scooped a handful of the freezing water into his mouth. He then spat the cold water onto a metal wire hanging from the ceiling. The rumbling sounds in the sauna grew louder and steam billowed out from metal panels in the walls. The temperature in the room increased.

'What did you do?' asked Autumn.

Igor jerked a thumb at the dripping wire. 'Thermometer.'

'Are you crazy?' Autumn locked eyes with the red-skinned man who was contentedly wiping the sweat from his armpits with both hands. 'I can't stand this.' Autumn stood up to leave.

'You asked me a question.'

'What?'

'You asked me why I do not steal cars for Gregor.'

'Why don't you?'

'Because I am not car thief.'

'But you steal car parts.'

'This is different.'

'I don't see how.' Autumn sat down. He was feeling light-headed.

'How long have you been going out with Kookla?' Igor asked.

'What does that have to do with stealing?'

'How long?'

Autumn rested his head in his hands. 'A year ... maybe more.'

'And Robin, her first boyfriend, do you know how long they were together?'

'I'm not sure.'

‘Four years,’ he said. ‘He is with her much longer. Maybe there is only a part of Kookla belonging with you. For you to try and keep this, to keep it away from Robin, it is like stealing.’

‘I’m not a thief.’

‘Robin would disagree.’

‘Robin’s gone.’

‘No, he is back, and he has visited me and is wanting to find Kookla. If he finds Kookla she will go with him unless you are there to be with her. I think she is safer with you. I would like that you and Kookla are back together.’

‘I understand what you’re getting at,’ said Autumn. ‘You’re talking about commitment, the degree of commitment ...’

‘What is degree?’

‘A degree is how much. It can be measured. It’s like measuring a temperature.’

‘What is your degree of commitment to Kookla?’

Autumn shook his head. ‘I don’t know.’

‘It is like measuring a temperature you say?’

‘Yes.’

‘One’s temperature can change.’ Igor showered Autumn’s body with the bucket of icy water.