

## Chapter 3

### A Darkened Room

Thursday, June 27

David Anthony Burke banged the side of his head against the wall, next to the window.

His thirteen-year-old body, small for his age, lay sprawled across the chair in his room at the Greenfield Convalescent Care nursing home. He had one arm thrown over the back of the green fabric cushion, the other dangling through the hole between the wooden armrest and the seat. The light blue pajamas he wore had shifted both up and down, the top halfway up his stomach and the bottoms exposing a few inches of pale buttocks. His skin there was the same color as the rest of his body--the pasty, almost transparent pallor of someone who spends too much time indoors.

Outside the window before him, a trio of blue jays fought and tumbled over one another on the lawn, seeking dominance over the seed-filled wooden feeder. David's hazel eyes pointed in their general direction, but were vague, unfocused. He hummed a single note, his mouth slightly open, and a few drops of spit trailed down the side of his cheek.

He continued to roll his head up and over, knocking against the wall beside the window. He'd been doing this for nearly an hour.

Just then, a nurse came in and, muttering a few mild curses to himself, moved the chair away from the window, and David along with it. The boy stopped humming instantly. Otherwise, he displayed no sign of volition or awareness.

The nurse, a man of about thirty with a severe case of acne and whose name was Karl, turned the chair to face the safety-glassed window more directly. "Geez, David!" he said as he lifted the boy's unresponsive form into a sitting position. "You're gonna give yerself a concussion."

Karl put slippers back onto David's feet and wiped the trail of saliva from the boy's cheek with the large handkerchief he kept tucked in the back pocket of his uniform whites. In a lowered voice, he added, "That or completely rattle loose the little bit of brains God saw fit to give ya."

With a grunt, he began pulling the boy upright. "I'm gettin' too old for this... Geez, kid, you may not look like much, but you're heavier than you look, know what I mean?" As he extricated David's arm from under the chair's armrest, he glanced out the window. "Nice day out, huh?" Karl said. "Sure wish we was in it. Better than worryin' about what's on the news, huh?"

He readjusted the pajamas and put David's hands together in his lap. Then, Karl stood and stretched while he glanced around the small private room. "Why don'tcha draw a picture?" He said the last word in a typical South-Side Pittsburgh accent, pronouncing it 'pitcher.' Looking at the various sketches and crayon drawings that adorned the walls of David's room, he said "Ya got a talent there, David."

The room contained a bed, a small wooden table with a stool tucked under it, a high chest of drawers, and the green chair. On the walls were dozens of drawings, done in a variety of media--crayon, charcoal, pencil, and watercolor. There was one even done in ink, though they'd had to take the pen away after one of the other nurse's found David had broken it and smeared his face with its contents.

The drawings showed a degree of detail and sophistication unexpected because they came from a boy who spent most of his days apparently staring at nothing. The subjects varied--a large oak tree on a hillside, two dogs--a golden retriever and a huge Newfoundland--wrestling together in a field of grass, an old-style station wagon of the variety with the fake-wood sides. Most, however, were of animals: Horses, dogs, cats, bears, and so on. Most were drawn on cream-colored construction paper, although some had been done on larger white easel-sheets.

In the bottom drawer of the chest were a dozen sheets of the construction paper, a half-box of charcoal, and a huge box of crayons, two hundred fifty six different colors in all, most of which were worn down to less than half their original length. David didn't do much, but he did clearly enjoy Drawing Time.

Karl was just about to leave the room, when he heard voices approaching, one of them he recognized as Dr. Sanda Beck, the chief administrator of Greenfield. "I'd be quite happy to give you a complete tour of our facilities," she was saying in the clipped, precise tones of a schoolteacher, "and of course, you can visit with your nephew for a time. However, I must insist that if he shows any sign of restiveness or distress, we will have to leave him be."

Smiling a little, Karl knew the reason for the administrator's mannerisms and speech patterns was because she'd actually been an elementary schoolteacher, first grade, for some twenty years before getting her doctorate and changing careers. He shot a glance at David to make sure the boy was still presentable; Karl knew that in all likelihood, within minutes of leaving, the kid would be slouched down, half-undressed, and drooling again. For now though, David was staying put, giving every appearance of merely staring out the window, hands limp in his lap. The boy blinked only every now and then.

Dr. Beck bustled into the room, a short, sturdy, matronly woman who always wore her long, gray hair up in a complicated hairdo and just the barest touch of makeup. She looked every inch the grandmotherly figure, too, long brown skirts under a floral jacket, plain stockings, and sensible shoes. As she caught sight of the nurse, she said, "Oh, hello Karl. I'm glad you're here." Two people--a man and a woman--followed her into David's small room, making it somewhat crowded. Indicating the pair, the administrator continued, "These are Mister and Miz Anderson--David's aunt and uncle. They've asked to see him. This is Karl, one of our senior care nurses. He's been with us for...what is it? Five years now? And how is David?"

"Six actually, ma'am," Karl acknowledged and nodded to the couple. "Pleased to meet'cha. As for a visit, shouldn't be a problem. He's been in one of his better moods today."

Mr. and Ms. Anderson looked to be a fairly ordinary couple in their late thirties--with the exception of their attire. The gentleman wore a gray pin-stripe Brooks Brothers suit, a 'power-blue' silk tie (knotted perfectly in a modified Windsor), and impeccably shined black wingtip shoes. He was of average height and build, with sandy-brown hair, cut in the latest style--slightly longer on top and combed just-so. The eyes behind his gold wire-rim glasses were a vague, watery blue that seemed to skitter here and there. In one hand, he carried an expensive leather briefcase. As for his wife, she too could've been almost anybody, but for the obvious quality of her clothes--her gray wool pants-suit obviously tailored, with matching charcoal-colored pumps, and over this a Burberry trenchcoat. Her black handbag bore a Prada label. She wore no visible makeup, and her dark brown hair hung neatly to her shoulders. In contrast to her husband, Ms. Anderson's eyes were green, sharp, and intense--like a predator's.

Both otherwise seemed eminently forgettable, neither attractive nor unattractive. In fact, the only thing that really stood out about them was the almost improbably impeccable nature of their clothing and appearances.

Of course, it didn't surprise Karl very much that David's relatives would be well-off. As far as nursing homes in the greater Pittsburgh metropolitan area went, Greenfield was one of the most expensive.

"I feel I must caution you," Dr. Beck continued, "that although David here is a very high-functioning autistic, he has severe limitations. In particular, I ask that you not touch or attempt to hug him. Trust me--he would not experience the physical contact as the simple gesture of affection you might intend it to be. For that matter, he may not react well to any attempts at

interaction, particularly since you are not familiar to him. So please keep this in mind. It's not personal or a sign that we or anyone else has been abusing him--it's just the way he is."

"I understand," said Ms. Anderson, in a low, throaty voice. "Has de boy had any other visitors recently?" She spoke in a thick, Russian-Slavic accent, full of aspirated h's and lightly rolled r's.

Dr. Beck thought about this for a moment, tapping a painted forefinger nail against her teeth before answering. "No," she said slowly. "I don't believe so, but I didn't take time to check the files when you arrived. Is it important?"

"Yes, please," said the woman. "However, it can wait until we finish with this visit."

Karl had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from bursting into laughter. Ms. Anderson's speech patterns were so extreme as to be a virtual parody. It reminded him of Ensign Chekov's quasi-Russian accent from the original Star Trek TV series. He put his hands behind his back and kept his eyes down, or on David.

If Dr. Beck felt similarly, she gave no sign of it, professional as she always was, whatever the circumstances. "Certainly," she said, smiling. "Do you have any other questions? I mean, about David?"

Mr. Anderson had wandered off to inspect David's artwork, decorating the walls of his room; as yet, he'd still not said a word. Karl found himself wondering if he'd have an accent as preposterous as his wife's.

So far, David blissfully ignored them all.

"Has there been any change in his condition?" asked Ms. Anderson. "Any sign of awareness? Or other improvement?"

Dr. Beck blinked, puzzled. "I'm sorry, I really don't think you understand the nature of autism," she replied. "It's a life-long condition. Those with cases as severe as David's are almost never able to function outside the controlled, predictable environment of an institution such as this one. They crave sameness, order, even something as basic as an unchanging schedule. He will likely spend the rest of his days, if not here, then in a place very much like it. If he's fortunate."

"I see," Ms. Anderson said, frowning.

"Just so you know," Dr. Beck added quickly, "we have had David evaluated regularly. We've also tried him on a number of the more promising new treatments, but I'm afraid he just hasn't responded to any of them so far."

Mr. Anderson spoke up then, from over near the head of David's bed. "Excuse me," he said, and unlike his wife, he had no discernable accent whatsoever. "Did the boy paint this?" He pointed to the large portrait on the wall just above the headboard.

Done in acrylics on canvas, the framed painting depicted a deer, the head and neck of a large buck set against a darkening twilight sky. Its branching antlers rose high, and the evening star shone among the ivory tines. The animal faced dead-on straight, muzzle down, a hint of moisture showing on its dark nose. The eyes, though black, reflected the purple of the heavens, and seemed to be looking directly at you, no matter where you stood in relation to it. Its detailed brown fur gave the illusion of being stirred by a gentle wind. The painting was quite gorgeous, the work of a master.

"Why yes," replied Dr. Beck. "Yes, he did. Quite remarkable, isn't it? As a matter of fact, David drew all the art you see in the room here, plus a few more we have tacked up in the Activity Room. Autistic he may be, but David is not without his talents. We try to encourage him in this. I wasn't here when that particular painting was done--but you were, weren't you, Karl?"

"Yes, ma'am," Karl answered, nodding. Then, directing more of his attention to the odd couple, he continued, "Usually we only let him draw with watercolors, crayons, or pastels, but the Channel 2 news people insisted on giving him real paint for a change. No idea how they found out about David, maybe through somebody who used to work here, I dunno. It was right after that TV movie won all the awards. Y'know--'Jeffrey's Story'? They wanted to do a story about some of the different kinds of savant syndromes."

"Savant syndrome'?" repeated Ms. Anderson. "I do not understand. What is this?"

This last came out as '*Vot eez deese?*'--and Karl had to bite his cheek again.

"It refers to an extraordinary ability or gift that those with...mental challenges will sometimes exhibit," Dr. Beck jumped in, almost as if sensing Karl's discomfiture. "It's a rare thing, and not even limited to the autistic. But they do seem to have these gifts somewhat more often than do the others."

"What kinds of gifts?" Ms. Anderson asked, quite intent now, more so than seemed warranted, at least in Karl's opinion. "Things besides drawing well?"

If Dr. Beck took any particular note of the tone, she gave no indication. "Oh, some are calendar counters--that is, give them any date at all, and they can tell you which day of the week it fell on. Others can memorize huge amounts of information at a glance. In my last position, I once met a

young girl--completely uncommunicative in every way, not even potty-trained--but she could play piano. Any song Jessica heard a single time, she could repeat perfectly. Bach, Rachmaninoff, Mozart--even the Beatles. You should have heard her rendition of 'Hey Jude'--it brought tears to my eyes, it was so beautiful. She was more remarkable because girls with autism are usually more profoundly impaired than the boys, and Jessica was no exception."

"Has the boy shown any 'gifts' besides painting?" Ms. Anderson wanted to know. Again, to Karl's ear, there seemed to be a great deal left unsaid here, a certain avid intensity, as if they *expected* David to have other abilities.

"No, he hasn't," Dr. Beck replied, plainly puzzled. "I think we may be getting off track here. These savant gifts are a wonderful thing, but they don't begin to make up for the profound neurological difficulties. People focus on what the mentally challenged person can do well, and ignore everything else they cannot do at all. People with autism could be said to live in a very different world from the rest of us. They demand order, because they can't create it for themselves, inside their own heads. Furthermore, they can only process certain kinds of sensory input--and that often very poorly."

"So he cannot understand us? Is he aware of us?"

"I'm certain he's aware of us," said Dr. Beck, shaking her head. "Whether he can interact with us in any meaningful way is another matter entirely. Karl here could probably get David to follow simple directions, because the boy's familiar with his voice and his presence. If you spoke to him, the words would likely be perceived as complete gibberish. Random noise, with no more content than the quacking of ducks."

Karl was barely following this conversation himself, because the administrator wasn't saying anything he hadn't heard before. Instead, he was remembering the day David had painted his masterpiece, that beautiful deer painting above the boy's bed.

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When he'd guided David toward the Activity Room, Karl had been certain the kid would either withdraw completely or become confused and start thrashing about. In unfamiliar situations, David had done both before. The staff psychologist called these violent episodes "acting out"; Karl, coming from far more modest origins, called it "pitching a fit" or "throwing a tantrum."

It amounted to the same thing, whatever you called it. And a thirteen-year-old boy could throw quite an impressive tantrum, even if he was small for his age and didn't get much exercise.

The way the Activity Room looked now, it couldn't have gotten farther from 'familiar' if they'd tried. The large, open room contained at least a half-dozen adult strangers, bright lights, cameras, equipment, cables, and painting materials--every one of them things David had never seen before. Even the staff psychologist had recommended to the young reporter that she allow David to draw with his own supplies. He further advised they conduct the interview at the time of day David almost always worked on his drawings, after physical therapy in the morning and lasting until lunch, or in the afternoon after David's nap. But there was no swaying the ambitious young woman with the exquisitely coiffed ash-blonde hair and chiseled cheekbones. She'd insisted the paints and easel would have far more impact than David's usual media.

Karl led the boy over to the center of all this chaos, using a pinch of sleeve to do the directing. This always seemed to work better and more consistently than touching David's arm or hand directly. He remembered how the boy looked confused at first, and more than a little frightened.

Then, David's half-focused eyes happened upon the paints, in a pile on the table nearest the easel the TV people had set up for him. Before anyone could react, he rushed over and grabbed at the slender metal tubes. Clutching a double-handful of the paints to his narrow chest, he literally crooned with wordless delight, "*Haaeeeeeeeeeahhhh!*"

Then, with unnerving efficiency, the boy uncapped nearly all the tubes of paint and began to mix them on the palette near the easel. Although he'd never seen these implements before, he seemed to understand how to use both the palette and plastic palette knives provided. All the while, the pretty blonde TV news reporter kept trying to ask David questions, but it was as if she didn't even exist to him.

Karl remained alert, still halfway certain that David would astound them all by eating the paints he'd so carefully mixed. But he didn't. Instead, he sorted among the half-dozen brushes on the table and picked the largest one. Then he worked it on his palette and set the brush to the canvas. Minutes later, when he set down the first brush, he'd done the background, a broad sweeps of deep purple-blue that looked to Karl like the color at the edge of outer space.

David went through the selection of brushes again, chose a medium grade slant-tip this time, and began to sketch with a dark, loamy tint he'd mixed from brown, red, and black. All the while, the reporter prattled on about "hidden, genius-like abilities" and "natural musicians," and "calendar counters." The cameras rolled.

Once, when the reporter got in his way, David leaned to one side and painted around her. His strokes were sure, precise, and incredibly fast.

By time he finished an hour later, everyone, including the camera crew, had stopped everything and stood gaping with astonishment at David's creation. The magnificent, majestic deer held them all spellbound, pinning everyone with its jet black eyes, including the boy. As Karl stared at the portrait for an unknown amount of time, he felt the sensation of falling endlessly into those dark orbs.

The Buck gazed steadily back, deep into and through him. Somehow, it seemed to know every last thing about him.

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In David's room now, caught by the deer's eyes once more, Karl felt a little of the same sensation, despite the presence of all these others.

He also realized with a start that he'd missed the last couple minutes of conversation between Dr. Beck and Ms. Anderson. He shook himself. The administrator was saying, "I'm really sorry, I don't know how I can make this more clear. I'm *delighted* that you've taken an interest in David's welfare, and I hope you will come back for return visits. Until you arrived, we had no idea he even had any living relatives. The Burke Family Trust has been paying for David's care since the day he was admitted, but we've only been in contact with the trustee in charge of financial matters, Mr. Logan."

"Then I fail to see problem," Ms. Anderson said angrily, the emotion, if anything, making her accent thicker and more incomprehensible. "We are family. Why can we not take the boy with us now?"

*Uh oh*, Karl said to himself. *I smell trouble...*

"First of all, I truly don't think you understand what you are proposing," Dr. Beck explained, her lips a thin line, much of her usual natural ebullience long gone. Karl knew full well she got like this any time she felt the health and well-being of one of her charges, young or old, was at risk. "You have as much as admitted you know nothing about caring for an autistic child. David has special needs; he's having them met here, and quite well, I might add. Greenfield really does represent the best long-term care money can buy."

"We can hire specialists, if that is what is needed," argued Ms. Anderson, her husband having moved closer to David, almost possessively.

Karl realized something just then. The Andersons didn't really give the impression of being a married couple at all. It was more like...what? An instant later he had it: Boss and underling. Furthermore, married or not, there was no doubt at all which of these two people was in charge. He made up his mind then to intervene, if what he thought *might* happen actually did. No, he wouldn't put it past them at all to try to snatch the kid and make a run for it. Karl managed to catch Dr. Beck's eye. He pointed at his own chest, and then down at the carpeted floor, and looked the question at her. The unspoken words, *You want me to stay here, right?*

Dr. Beck understood, thankfully, and gave him a small, imperceptible nod. She said, "I am trying to be reasonable here. And further, to explain why it's not in David's best interest to put him through such an upheaval, unprepared. I would add that I have only your word that you are who you say you are--"

Ms. Anderson interrupted, saying, "We have papers. Documents. Hospital and vaccination records. Copy of the boy's birth certificate." She nodded towards her 'husband,' who made as if to open his leather briefcase, but Dr. Beck stopped him with an imperious gesture.

"Unless one of those papers is a notarized court order giving you legal custody, don't bother," she said firmly. "You are not taking David today, and that is final."

"Not even if the trust organization has authorized this?"

"Not even then," replied Dr. Beck. "I know David's case is somewhat unusual, but when he was admitted to our care, the courts appointed us as his legal guardian. In fact, there is only one person with the authority to make final determinations regarding his care--and that happens to be me, as chief administrator of Greenfield. Were you to take him from here, he'd still be my legal ward, until a court says otherwise or I'm replaced. Now I have no idea why his parents went to all the trouble of setting up a trust fund for him, yet left it up to the courts to select a guardian, but that's neither here nor there."

"So you are saying if we get this court order, you will release the boy to us?" Ms. Anderson pressed.

Dr. Beck's hands were clenched in fists at her sides; Karl had never seen her this angry before. "Clearly you have not been listening to me," she said, her words becoming increasingly clipped and precise, like stones dropped from a great height, one by one. "Don't you care at all for David's well-being?! You *cannot* simply bundle him up in a car, drop him into a completely unfamiliar environment, and expect everything to be hunky-dory. Are you prepared for violent

outbursts? Hours of endless screaming? Do you have breakables? Do you even know what David likes to eat? Have you laid in a supply of diapers? Because I can assure you, it's not at all uncommon for an autistic child to regress when they're faced with intolerable changes to their routines and environment."

As if in response to these very issues, David began finally to react to the ruckus going on around him. Ducking his head, he slowly slumped in his chair like a balloon deflating. From behind closed lips, he made a noise--a low, wordless whine that started off low, but threatened to grow in volume.

Most other times, Karl would've taken this as a typical warning sign of an impending tantrum; in this instance, however, he also saw it as an opportunity. "Uh, Dr. Beck?" he said into the first available pause in the two women's argument. "I know it's not my place to say what happens in the end, but all this--well, all this is getting to the kid. You know how sensitive he is to people expressing strong emotions around him--he handles angry people least well of all."

"You're right, Karl," Dr. Beck sighed, consciously unclenching her hands and her jaw. "I'm sorry, I don't know what got into me." Turning her attention back towards the strange, wealthy Andersons, she said, "We can discuss this further in my office, if you like, but I must insist that we leave David alone now. If you wish simply to visit, you can come again next week."

"That won't be necessary, we have seen all we need to see at this time," Ms. Anderson replied, obviously still fuming, and David's whine stepped up a notch in volume and pitch. "We will be back when we have secured the required papers."

Karl knew that if they delayed much longer, that whine would soon become a piercing shriek. So did Dr. Beck. Herding the visitors toward the door, the administrator said, "If I might ask a favor, could we return to my office for a few minutes anyway? I should like copies of those vaccination and treatment records--our own files aren't complete in that regard. If you'll start ahead of me, I need to speak with Karl here for just a moment."

As soon as Mr. and Ms. Anderson left the room, David stopped his whine in mid-note. A small trail of spittle leaked from the corner his mouth though, and he slumped further down in the chair. When Dr. Beck waved Karl over, he stepped close and asked quietly, "We don't really need those records, do we, ma'am?"

"No," the administrator acknowledged. "But I do want a look at what they do have, make copies if they'll let me. I want to see what we're up against."

Karl saw the worry plain on Dr. Beck's motherly face. "What is it, really?" he asked.

"I don't trust those two, not as far as I could throw the both of them," she admitted, frowning.

"I've seen their type before--they never have any doubt about getting their way, eventually. Most times, they do. What I don't understand is why they want physical custody of a boy whose needs they can't possibly understand. Or meet."

"Could be the trust fund," Karl suggested. "Ever think of that?"

"You could be right," Dr. Beck replied thoughtfully, shaking her head sadly. "On the other hand, if that's all they wanted, why take physical custody when legal guardianship would suffice? No, something about this stinks to high heaven, something they're not telling us. Whatever the case, it's imperative we do what we can to protect David. I will not stand by quietly while they attempt the moral equivalent of locking him in the attic and throwing away the key--assuming that isn't their actual objective. The important thing though is I want you to inform the rest of the staff that Mr. and Ms. Anderson are *not* to be allowed unsupervised visits with David. At all times, I want at least two staff members present. Is that clear?"

"Yes ma'am," said Karl, nodding. "You really believe they might run off with him?"

"Them? I wouldn't put it past them. That woman claimed to be the boy's aunt--his mother's sister. If there's the least family resemblance there, I don't see it."

"Gotcha. Anything else, ma'am?"

"Just keep an eye on David today, make sure this business hasn't upset him too much, all right?"

With that, Dr. Beck clapped her hands together lightly. "Now I really must get back to our...!guests.! Do let me know if there are any problems."

"Yes, ma'am."

With that, Dr. Beck hurried away, the low heels of her sensible shoes clacking on the tile floor in the long hallway.

When she was gone, Karl waited a minute to be sure that David would remain still and calm. The boy seemed completely unaware and oblivious again. Satisfied, Karl pulled the large handkerchief from his back pocket and wiped the drool from the corner of David's mouth. When this seemed not to bother the boy, he pulled him upright, arranging the chair so he could see outside the window more clearly. It looked like there were some birds goofing around out on the lawn out there, which he hoped would be entertaining--particularly after what had just happened.

Watching David, such a frail, pale boy, Karl felt a curious surge of affection and sympathy for the him. Impulsively and against his better judgment, he took a risk and ruffled David's tangled brown hair, saying, "Catch you later, kid. Be good."

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As soon as the nurse was gone and the room quiet once more, David began to squirm to the right and slump down. The slippers came off and, with a twisting motion, he pushed his bare feet against the carpeted floor, slowly maneuvering the chair back to an angle with the window. He slid his legs up onto the left armrest. In minutes, he was in exactly the same position as he had been before. One arm lay over the back of the chair, the other between the arm and seat, and his head lolled and knocked against the wall.

The blue jays moved closer, playing dominance games on the green lawn. They squawked and flapped at one another among the dappled patterns of sun and shade thrown by the large maple tree outside the window. The light and dark green flickered and jumped like flames as breezes ruffled the maple's leaves.

To David's deliberately unfocused eyes though, the green flames became dancing bubbles of light. The note he hummed relentlessly made the bones of his jaw and forehead vibrate, and each time he knocked his head against the concrete wall, the bubbles would scatter and coalesce. Almost, he could make out the pattern.

Somehow, it was important to see the pattern.

No, not just important, but *imperative*. That was a word he'd heard just recently, and for some reason, it had stuck with him. On an intuitive level, he understood that it meant "dreadfully important and essential."

To see and comprehend the pattern was *imperative*.

The jays added blue and black to the dancing greens. David half-closed his eyes and the bubbles became points, dimmer but more distinct. First, the motes would all shift one way and back, as if carried on ocean waves, riding up and down. Then there might be a twirling, round and round, groups of points all orbiting unseen centers. Once in a great while, the tiny lights would swirl around in a gyre, each mote circling in still smaller spirals, the whole like wheels within wheels, like Ezekiel's chariot of fire. In these moments, David would hum ever louder and bang his head with greater force against the wall.

In the middle of the gyre of lights, he glimpsed things in flashes: A huge explosion that went on forever, burning everything. An open door, standing alone in the middle of a snowy field. A man, in a white robe, with gray-green eyes, graying brown hair and beard, and a sad face.

A frightened woman, dressed in jeans and a blue sweater, walking down a city street. She carried a heavy bag over one shoulder. This particular vision lasted long enough, he tried to wave to her. But before he could see if she reacted, both she and the street were gone.

Then he saw the door again, a large oaken thing, standing in a polished marble archway. On the door was carved a shape that looked something like the painting he'd made--a deer, only different. On one side of the door was a shallow, snowy valley with a dark, still pool in the middle; on the other side, nothing at all. A void of utter black emptiness.

The last thing he saw was his own hand, and a large, silvery key laying across his palm. Motes of light and cobalt sparks danced around the key's length. The key's handle was ring of entangled vines and flowers, but the teeth at the other end of the shaft shifted constantly, impossibly for anything of this world.

The motes had grown dim by now. Eventually, a cloud bank covered the sun and the points of light went out. The jays had long since settled their territorial dispute, each had eaten his fill from the feeder in turn and left.

David stopped humming and lay his head against the jutting corner of the wall. Exhausted, he closed his eyes and fell asleep. Unnoticed, thin red rivulets gathered and trickled down from a lacerated wound on the side of his head, towards the back.

Red drops trembled at the uneven ends of his tousled hair and fell to the carpeted floor below.