

DAVID
AMBROSE



SUPERSTITION

“Chilling...
genuinely frightening...
An unflinching mastergame of
reality manipulation.”
—*Publishers Weekly*

WARNER BOOKS



A NOVEL



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[EPILOGUE](#)

The Man Who Turned into Himself
Mother of God
Hollywood Lies

To Lulu, Mick, and Daisy In whose house this book was conceived and by coincidence completed
eighteen months later Whatever coincidence means

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This novel is based on an experiment that actually took place in Toronto in the early seventies, and which has been widely written about in the literature of parapsychology. The best account is that written by two of the participants, Iris M. Owen and Margaret Sparrow. Their book, *Conjuring Up Philip: An Adventure in Psychokinesis*, unfortunately out of print and hard to obtain, is a classic in its field.

I am indebted to Brenda J. Dunne and Michael Ibison of the Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research (PEAR) program for taking the time to show me some of the extraordinary work they are doing in the field of consciousness-related physical phenomena. *Margins of Reality* (Harcourt Brace) by Robert G. Jahn, the director of PEAR, and Brenda J. Dunne is essential reading.

John Beloff's *Parapsychology: A Concise History* (Athlone) provides an admirably clear and restrained overview of the subject, and led me to the challenging and closely argued articles and papers of, among others, Helmut Schmidt and Brian Millar.

Other writers whose work has been particularly stimulating include Kit Pedlar, Stan Gooch, Michael Harrison, Alan Gauld, and A. D. Cornell.

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“There is a superstition in avoiding superstition.”

Francis Bacon 1561–1626

“Superstition: An ambiguous word, it probably cannot be used except subjectively.”

Encyclopædia Britannica

PROLOGUE

He gazed across the street at a house indistinguishable, except in detail, from the ones on either side. It had a door of a green so dark that it was almost black, with its number—139—picked out in plain brass characters. To one side and above it were symmetrically proportioned windows, their light lending a haze of warmth to the chill November dusk. Framed within them he could see an interior of clean lines and ordered spaces; from where he stood he had an angular glimpse of paintings, furniture and works of art arranged in what looked like a pleasing mixture of the antique and the new.

It was a prospect that he would normally have found inviting, but all he felt now was a profound apprehension, verging on dread, of what and who he was about to meet in there.

Sam had spoken to Ralph Cazaubon on the phone only once—less than an hour ago. He knew nothing of him apart from what Joanna had told him, which did not include the fact that they were married. “My wife” was how Cazaubon had referred to her. It made no sense that Joanna and this man should be married, and it filled him with an aching sense of something far more disquieting than jealousy, and to which he could not yet give a name.

He noticed a couple of passersby dart a curious glance in his direction, and realized that he had lost track of how long he had been standing there. A few minutes at most. He waited as a cab picked up a fare in front of him and pulled away, then stepped off the curb.

The house seemed to grow, filling his field of vision as he approached. He had the fleeting impression that it was reaching out to him, enfolding him, preparing to absorb him. He felt a moment of irrational panic, but forced himself on without breaking his stride.

As a scientist, Sam was committed to a rational response to all things. Reason and logic, he believed, were the only tools at man's disposal in any attempt he might make to penetrate the mystery of his being; though how far they could take him on that quest was becoming, at least to Sam, increasingly open to doubt. These past months had seen the widening of a gulf between things that had happened and any ability he may once have had to make sense of them. It was a gulf into which the shadow land of superstition had begun to insinuate itself, spreading into every corner of his mind like the gray mist of the Manhattan twilight that settled all around him into every crack and crevice of the city. Superstition, he now knew from painful personal experience, was the one thing against which reason offered no defense.

He climbed the stone steps and reached out to push the bell, deliberately suppressing any hesitation that he felt. He heard it ring somewhere distantly, then waited, forcing from his mind any preconception of the man whose footsteps he half imagined he could hear coming toward him.

A moment later the door was opened by someone tallish with a well-groomed mass of thick, dark hair. The man's eyes were dark, with an inquiring, steady gaze. He wore a comfortable tailored jacket in a good tweed, gray trousers, a knitted tie. His shoes were polished wing tips in a rich burgundy and looked handmade. Sam would have put him in his late thirties.

“Mr. Cazaubon? I'm Sam Towne...”

They didn't shake hands. Cazaubon looked as though he might under normal circumstances have had a pleasant smile, but at the moment he was as wary of Sam Towne as Sam was of him. When he stepped back from the door in a wordless invitation to his visitor to enter, there was an assurance in his movement that was more than just physical; it spoke of breeding, a sense of who he was—and probably, Sam thought, of old money.

“As I told you on the phone, my wife isn't here yet,” he said, leading the way into the drawing room.

It worried Sam that she wasn't there. He wanted to ask where in God's name she could have been since the events of that morning—events of which, he felt reasonably certain, this man in front of him knew nothing. But he held his tongue. He must tread warily, proceed with caution. As much as he needed to know that Joanna was safe, he had to avoid antagonizing Cazaubon. He needed to talk to him, find out who he was, and many other things about him; he had to ask more questions than any stranger had a right to ask.

Sam knew he must have sounded odd on the phone. Yet he could see that the other man was at least initially reassured by his appearance. There was nothing very threatening about Sam Towne. Of medium height and build, about the same age as Cazaubon, he looked what he was—an underpaid academic with little in the way of worldly ambition or material achievement. He glimpsed his reflection in the big Venetian mirror over the carved stone fireplace and realized how shabby he looked in these surroundings, with his raincoat hanging open over a well-worn corduroy jacket, denim shirt, and jeans.

“I'm sorry,” Cazaubon said, as though correcting an omission of protocol on his part, “can I take your coat?”

Sam slipped it off and handed it over. “I don't intend to take up any more of your time than I have to,” he said, as though by way of reassurance.

Cazaubon nodded and went out into the hall, where he hung the coat on an antique iron stand. “Can I offer you a drink?” he said as he returned, good manners not entirely concealing the suspicion he still felt.

“No—thank you very much.”

“Then why don't you sit down and tell me what this is about.” Cazaubon indicated an Italian sofa in oatmeal fabric, then sat in an armchair across from it, and waited.

Towne leaned forward, caught himself twisting his hands, and laced his fingers to keep them still.

“This is all going to sound very strange. I gather from what you said on the phone that your wife has never spoken of me or the work that I've been doing...”

“To the best of my knowledge she hasn't, Mr. Towne—sorry, *Dr. Towne* I believe you said.”

“I'm a research psychologist at Manhattan University,” Sam began. “I run a project investigating various kinds of anomalous phenomena.” He felt his fingers start to twist again, pulled them apart, and made an open gesture as he ran through the usual brief litany with which he began any explanation of his work. “Basically, we've been looking into the interaction of human consciousness with measurable physical devices and systems. It covers fields such as telepathy, precognition, psychokinesis, remote viewing...”

Cazaubon's eyes narrowed slightly. “You mean you're some kind of psychic investigator?” he asked.

“Broadly speaking, yes, though I dislike the word ‘psychic.’ It's vague and implies a prejudgment of the phenomena we're observing. We're psychologists, engineers, statisticians, and physicists. There are seven of us, though we work with other departments in the university as well as outside groups and individuals.”

“What does all this have to do with my wife? To the best of my knowledge she has no experience of such things, nor any interest in them.”

Sam had to be careful here. He still didn't know who or what he was dealing with. The man across from him looked normal enough, civilized, thoughtful. But he couldn't be sure of anything anymore.

“Someone with your wife's name, or I should say using her maiden name, Joanna Cross, has been involved in a program I have been running for some time.”

Cazaubon looked at him with a disbelief that bordered on hostility. “That's impossible. I would have known about any such thing. You must have made a mistake.”

“Perhaps. If so, I'm here to clear it up.”

Cazaubon got to his feet with a restlessness that, it seemed to Sam, he was trying to conceal. He walked over to the fireplace, looked down into the empty grate, then turned once more to his visitor.

“You mean that some woman has been going around using my wife's identity? Is that what you're saying?”

“I don't want to alarm you. I'm sure there is some explanation...”

“Forgive me, I think this is very alarming indeed,” Cazaubon said, his tone hardening. “And quite possibly a matter for the police.”

“No, it's not something for the police,” Sam responded with more weariness than urgency, as though such a course would merely be a waste of time. “As a matter of fact the police are already involved—in a way.”

“How?” Cazaubon shot back, his voice tightening with concern.

“Two men have died today.”

Seeing the flash of alarm in the other man's eyes, he added quickly, “Your wife—or this woman calling herself your wife—was not directly involved. She wasn't even present when it happened.”

“Then why are you here?”

Towne hesitated. How could he begin to explain without sounding like a lunatic? His fears for her, like his deep misgivings about this man across from him, were not the kind that could be summed up quickly or expressed in any easily intelligible way. “I'm sorry,” he said eventually, “it's very hard to explain without your wife actually being here.”

Cazaubon frowned. “Look, Dr. Towne, my wife is an intelligent woman and a free agent, but I'm not sure I can have you upsetting her with a wild story about some total stranger pretending to be her—especially at the moment.”

He stopped, as though deciding not to elaborate on those last words, but his tone implied that she might be in some particularly delicate state: unwell perhaps; burdened by some problem; or maybe simply pregnant. Whatever the reason, Cazaubon made it clear that he was prepared to defend her against any intrusion or unnecessary worry.

“I understand how all this must sound,” Sam continued lamely.

“Do you? I don't even know who you are, apart from what you tell me.”

“You can call up the university.”

Cazaubon was silent for a moment. Sam felt that he would make the call, if not immediately then later. He hoped he would.

“Look,” he said, attempting the conciliatory tone of a reasonable man, “perhaps we can clear this thing up without troubling your wife. Do you happen to have a photograph of her that I could see?”

“Of course I do. Though I'm not sure what that would prove—except maybe to show you that this woman you're talking about is obviously not my wife.”

“At least it would be a first step.”

Cazaubon started across the room toward an ornate Chinese cabinet, but stopped as he pulled open a drawer. They had both heard a sound in the hall.

As she entered, Sam felt himself pulled to his feet more by sheer nervous tension than politeness. Cazaubon had already crossed the room to kiss her lovingly on the cheek, clearly happy and relieved.

to see her.

~~“Darling,” he was saying, “this is Dr. Sam Towne of Manhattan University. He's been telling me rather odd story...”~~

He stopped because Sam had gasped audibly. Both Cazaubon and the woman who had just entered turned their gaze toward the man who stood with his mouth slightly open and his pale blue eyes staring, unblinking, at her. His face was white and he looked to be on the verge of passing out.

Sam Towne had not been ready for this.

Something impossible had happened.

1

Eleanor (Ellie) Ray was not quite sixty, though most people meeting her would have guessed her to be at least ten years older. It was an impression she cultivated; the grandmotherly touch was worth hard cash in Ellie's business.

It was difficult, looking at her now, plain and dumpy, barely five feet tall, to imagine Ellie as she once had been—the high-kicking, fishnet-stockinged, feathered and sequined glamor half of “Wanda and Ray,” a comedy and magic act that had somehow eked out a living for twenty long, hard years on the road. She had been “Wanda,” and “Ray” had been Murray Ray, her husband. She was a dancer when they met, but too short for the chorus line, and not talented enough to be a single act. She worked up a couple of novelty numbers with another girl who was over six feet, and they played a few dates in the Catskills, but their bookings quickly dwindled from a handful to none, and Ellie was thinking about getting out of the business altogether when she met Murray.

He was only a year or two older than she, but already established and a pro, though not a star. He probably never would be. He was a funny-looking little guy, not much taller than she was, but kind of sweet. They'd found themselves on the same bill a few times that season, and he'd started showing her magic tricks backstage as a way, he hoped, of getting her into bed. She knew perfectly well what he was up to, and had already made up her mind to cooperate. It was easy come, easy go in those days. Sex was as good a way as any of passing the time after the show or between jobs.

But the magic was something new, and the fascination she found in it took her by surprise. She started practicing some of the tricks he'd shown her. Murray told her she had talent. All it takes, he said, was application—and that she had. To Ellie it was a last chance to avoid waiting tables, which was probably all she'd get offered outside the business.

They'd married three months after they met, but it was another year before she joined him on the stage. It took time to work up a new act, and Murray had been right about application. It was the little tricks, the throwaway stuff, that were really grueling to master. The big illusions were surprisingly simple and largely mechanical. But that wasn't their style; for one thing they didn't have the money to buy and transport the equipment that was needed. So they did it the hard way, with timing, patter, careful misdirection, and muscular dexterity. By the time she trod the boards with Murray, Ellie's small, short-fingered hands concealed a strength that few men could equal. She could flip cards, hide chiffon scarves, and switch marked dollar bills—all with a smile on her face that never flinched, even when the pain shot up to her elbows and sometimes all the way to her shoulders. It'll get better, she told herself. Practice makes perfect. When I'm really good, it won't hurt so much.

Ellie sat back and looked down at her hands, wrinkled now and speckled with liver spots. She turned them over, curling them like claws. The strength was still there when she needed it. There was no screw-top jar or bottle that didn't yield to her iron grip. She smiled as she remembered that weight lifter who'd gotten fresh with her one time in Atlantic City, until she'd grabbed him by the balls to let him know she wasn't happy. He'd never been the same man again.

She came out of her daydream and looked up. The murmur of voices was growing. Glancing through the rectangle of glass in front of her, which from the other side was just a mirrored fragment in one of the twin starbursts on each side of the stage, she could see the auditorium was already almost full. She looked down at her watch, an ostentatiously cheap one with a plastic strap that she always wore for work; the Cartier that Murray had given her on her last birthday was kept carefully in a drawer at home. Time enough to show that off in a few months when they were out of here, enjoying the bonanza they'd been building toward these last few years.

Negotiations for the sale of the place were discreetly in hand, and looked certain to net them enough to live out their days in comfort. Ellie had never been to Europe, and dreamed of seeing Paris, Rome, and London. Annual winter cruises in the Caribbean beckoned. And of course—this was the jewel in the crown for Ellie, the fulfillment of a life's ambition—there would be a town house in central Manhattan. The girl from New Jersey would end her days as an Upper East Side matron, living in the kind of house to which her mother had taken that long subway ride to scrub and clean every day of Ellie's childhood. It was a triumph that would lay to rest some ghosts for Ellie—the only kind of ghosts that she believed in.

A thin smile played on Ellie's lips at the thought, but died almost at once. It would have been so nice, she couldn't help thinking, to have had it all thirty years ago.

But still, better now, far better now than never.

Joanna Cross found a seat toward the back and to one side. It was a vantage point from which she could see everything without being conspicuous. It was already enough that she was younger than most of the people drawn to this place and others like it. Even the staff was largely middle-aged or older, apart from some of the behind-the-scenes and maintenance people, who didn't on the whole have much contact with guests.

There was, however, one trance medium who couldn't have been more than thirty, but he was the exception. And he was talented. His séances involved a luminous tin trumpet that floated in the dark and through which spirit voices spoke. Occasionally billowing clouds of ectoplasm spewed forth from his body, taking on the forms of dead departed loved ones of the sitters, while glittering points of light skipped and shimmered over people's heads. That it was all just some gigantic conjuring trick was obvious to Joanna. The only thing that amazed her was other people's inability to see what they didn't want to see, and their willingness to believe what they wanted to believe. Or needed to.

That was what got to her. On one level it was just silly but relatively harmless. On another it was the merciless exploitation of people who had suffered loss and tragedy and who needed help. Instead they had been tagged as suckers and taken on a cynical ride that, more often than not, would leave them penniless. That was why Joanna was going to put Ellie and Murray Ray where they belonged: in jail if she could, but at the very least she meant to expose and ruin them as a warning to others of the kind.

And there was no shortage of others like them. Since she had started researching these articles for the magazine, Joanna had been amazed at the size of the psychic industry. From the corner clairvoyant and palm reader to organized compounds like this, it was a business that turned over millions, maybe billions of dollars every year—most of it in cash, with the rest largely sheltered by well-meaning but misguided legislation that allowed any fraud to pose as the founder of some church and claim charitable status. That was no doubt why the auditorium in which Joanna now sat was referred to on the plan of the Camp Star-burst compound as “The Cathedral.”

Her gaze drifted from one to the other of the glittering glass and mirror structures on the walls at each side of the stage. They were, in all their vulgar ghastliness, an obvious reflection of the “starburst” theme. And behind one of them, Joanna knew, was the place from where Ellie Ray was able to look out, as she was probably doing now, and control the proceedings.

Joanna looked down at her watch. It would be starting soon. With any luck, for sure if she had her way, it would be the last séance that would ever be held in this place.

The pattern of swimming fish and drifting sea anemones disappeared from Ellie's computer screen as she hit a key. She called up the file that she'd assembled earlier in the day when she got the list of who'd be coming. They were mostly first- or second-timers who'd heard about the place from friends. Handled right, most of them would be good for several visits, and some of them represented potentially rich pickings. These latter would be singled out for longer individual séances with key mediums in the next day or two.

Ellie scrolled the information up the screen. Everything was there, all the information she needed—ordered, concise, and detailed—and duplicated in the box files that she kept for backup. Of course, she would have to put the right names to the hundred-fifty-odd faces out there, most of them belonging to people she had only spoken to for ten or fifteen minutes at the most. But she had a mnemonic for that—a trick she'd learned from a memory act years ago.

A sound behind her made her turn. Murray came in wiping his nose with a huge white handkerchief. He'd had a chill and she'd been quite concerned about him this past week, but he'd worked through it and never missed a séance. He seemed to be picking up now, though he was still unhealthily red in the face. She absolutely had to get him on a diet soon. He was carrying far too much weight for a man of his age. All his suits had been let out to the limit, and half of them he couldn't get into at all anymore.

“Ready to rock ,n, roll,” he said, stuffing the handkerchief back in his pocket. He picked up the slim battery pack by the computer and sat down with his back to Ellie. It was their usual routine. He fixed his earpiece securely in place, then sat still as she fed the threadlike filament that ran from it down the inside of his shirt collar and out through the little opening cut just below the shoulder blade. She pulled the end of it around and under his arm and plugged it into the battery pack, which he slipped into the special pocket in the lining of his jacket. She tapped the microphone in front of her, and he nodded. The connection was live.

Ellie waited a moment, checked once more through the rectangle of glass that everyone was reading, then cued Mark, their stage manager, to get the show under way.

Mark's stage-trained voice resonated impressively over the big speakers in the auditorium. “Ladies and gentlemen, the séance is about to commence. Mrs. Ellie Ray is here to welcome you with a few words of introduction.”

The curtain rose on a stage that was empty except for a massive straight-backed chair placed dead center—a throne in red velvet and mahogany. A rainbow of pale pastels moved constantly though all but imperceptibly across the ornate drapery behind. Ellie strode out from the wings, all smiles and holding up her hands to both acknowledge and arrest the ripple of applause that greeted her appearance.

“Now then, my dears,” she began, “we're all friends here, so just relax and let yourselves enter the quiet frame of mind that will help you touch your loved ones on the other side. The vibrations are very good in here. Very good. I can feel the spirits are drawn here and to all of us gathered here today.”

Always remember, the spirits *want* to make contact. They're just waiting for you to open your hearts and your minds, as I know you are doing at this minute, and they will come to you. My husband, Murray. You all know Murray..."

Murray waddled out, beaming over the assembled faces, took the hand that his wife held out to him, and gave a little bow, but not too much of one: the last thing he and Ellie wanted people to think was that they might once have been in show business.

"Murray will be with you on your journey to the spirit world today," Ellie continued, "and for those of you with us for the very first time, let me explain what's going to happen..."

As she spoke, Murray seated himself on the throne and Ellie produced a black silk scarf which she made a big show of tying securely over his eyes.

"If you want to make contact with anybody on the other side, all you have to do is raise your hand and one of our two volunteers—that's Merle and Minnie, there they are, on either side of you, giving you a little wave—will bring you a microphone. Now the microphone is only so the rest of us can hear you. If you don't want to speak your question out loud, the spirits will understand. They'll know what's in your heart, and they will respond through the medium, through Murray here. All you have to do if Merle or Minnie points you out is direct your thoughts to the spirit world, and your loved ones will respond through the medium. Alternatively, if you prefer, you can hand over some personal object, a watch or a key ring or a piece of jewelry or whatever, either your own or belonging to a loved one who's passed on. The vibrations will pass through the medium to the spirit world, and to whoever it is that you wish to make contact with."

Finally satisfying herself that the blindfold was secure, Ellie stepped back a few paces.

"Now I'm going to leave you, but before I do I'm going to ask you all to remain very quiet for a short time while the medium enters the spirit world. After that you'll hear an announcement asking those of you with a question to raise your hands. Now very quiet, please, ladies and gentlemen...very very quiet..."

The lights dimmed as Ellie slipped into the wings and Murray assumed the pre-trance position—head down, chest heaving with slow, deep breaths. Gradually a white spotlight opened up on him from directly overhead, glowing like a ray of heavenly light. After about a minute Murray slowly raised his head as though listening to something above and slightly to one side. Then he nodded as though in acknowledgment of some unseen presence.

Mark's voice came softly once again from the speakers over the expectant, waiting heads. "Ladies and gentlemen, the medium is ready. Please hold up your hands to indicate you have a question."

From her vantage point at the computer, Ellie watched as Merle appeared uncertain which of the sea of waving hands to give the microphone to first. In an acting job of the first magnitude, she seemed to make a random choice—but it was no mistake when she handed the mike, as instructed earlier by Ellie, to a plump woman in her sixties whose husband had recently died, leaving her a high seven-figure fortune in securities and gilt-edged stock...

Very smooth, thought Joanna, admiring the performance despite her contempt for it. Murray had answered several unspoken as well as, spoken questions, each time drawing murmurs of amazement from his audience. Now he was giving a demonstration of psychometry, turning over in his stubby fingers a brooch that a woman near the front had sent up. He mentioned names and places, cleverly playing out and embellishing the information that Ellie was whispering in his ear. It was impressive, but only if you didn't know how it was done. And Joanna knew.

Nobody showing up cold at the gate of Camp Starburst would ever be admitted then and there—not even if they waved a wad of hard cash under Ellie's acquisitive nose. If the wad was big enough they might be given tea in the Rays' private quarters, and maybe even taken on a limited tour of the compound. In the course of all this they would invariably say enough about themselves to give the Rays a starting point. From then on it was routine.

The first step was to check them out on the psychic network that extended across the country and beyond. There was a surprisingly large army of believers who went from seer to medium to mystic, one after the other, often traveling long distances for a consultation. Had anyone told them that the information they were being fed about themselves had been faxed or e-mailed from the last hustler who had duped them, they wouldn't have believed it. Because they wouldn't want to. They preferred to hang on to the myths of spiritism.

If the network didn't come up with the goods, Ellie simply called up a detective agency to which she paid a regular retainer and had them dig up what they could. One thing was certain: by the time Ellie or Murray or any of their colleagues sat down for a séance with a sucker, everything that was about to happen had been planned and rehearsed to the last detail. There were no surprises in the spirit world.

But there was going to be a big one very soon. Joanna slipped a hand discreetly beneath the dark wig she was wearing and pressed the earpiece more firmly into place. The receiver in her purse was picking up every word that Ellie fed to Murray, and a recorder was getting it all on tape. Some of it was pretty juicy stuff; Ellie didn't bother to disguise her contempt for the suckers out there who bought what she and Murray were selling.

It was going to make good reading.

Ellie squinted through the glass to identify the woman near the back who had just handed something to Merle. It was that young woman, Rachel Clark, who was staying in Clouds Wing for the weekend. Ellie brought her file up on the computer screen. There wasn't much—just the fact that she had consulted seven mediums in the last few months, all in and around Philadelphia where she lived. She had wanted the same thing from all of them: to get in touch with her father, whom she had nursed through a long illness until his death the previous year. There was obviously some unresolved stuff there, though what it was remained vague.

“Dirty old sod probably been schtupping her since she was ten,” she muttered into the mike. “It's that girl with the dark hair that you noticed the other day—good tits under that baggy cardigan. Trust you to notice! Mother died when she was fifteen, never been married, engaged once, name of Johnny—nothing known about what happened to him. The old man manufactured kitchen equipment—sounds like there was money in it from the schools she went to.”

Ellie read off the remaining details as she peered through the glass to see what Rachel Clark had given to Merle. Murray was answering the previous question as Merle mounted the steps at the side of the stage. Careful timing meant that she had to pause long enough right next to Ellie's little window to offer a clear view of what she held, along with subtle finger signals to denote gold or gold plate, real jewelry or fake—anything that might usefully be passed on to the blindfolded Murray.

“Man's gold watch, father's I guess,” Ellie was saying as Murray wound up his previous reading, simultaneously taking in Ellie's information over the sound of his own voice. “The old man's name was James Anthony Clark. Mother was Susan Anne with an ‘e,’ née Ziegler. The kid's half-Jewish, that's a nine on the fucked-up meter for starters...”

Joanna had to fight to hide the grin of glee that wanted to spread across her face. They'd bought into every last detail of the phony identity and background she'd set up on those boring trips to Philadelphia these past few months. The proof was coming out of Murray's mouth as he regurgitated every empty lie she'd set to trap them.

And it was all on tape!

At just twenty years of age, Jeremy Holland was a general grunt around Camp Starburst. He got the job because his mother was a cousin of one of the resident mediums at the camp, and Jeremy was learning the trade himself. Today, however, he was manning the switchboard, and a situation had arisen that he was unsure how to handle. Ellie looked up with an air of surprise as he approached apologetically.

"I've got the police on the phone," he said.

Ellie's heart skipped a beat. She knew that some of what they did was marginally illegal, but took comfort in the thought that it would be almost certainly unprovable in court. But any contact with the law made her uncomfortable.

"What do they want?"

"They won't say. They want to talk to one of the guests. A Mrs. Anderson. Eileen Anderson."

"She's in there," Ellie said, nodding toward the auditorium. "She can't talk now. Tell them they'll have to leave a number or call back."

"I've told them. They insist." Jeremy's voice shook slightly. Like all staff on the compound, he feared Ellie's wrath; above all feared being the cause of it. "They said they want to talk to somebody in charge—now."

"Fuck!" Ellie muttered, thinking. "Listen, can you work this end for five minutes?"

"I'll do my best," he said, brightening at the opportunity and the confidence she was showing in him.

"He's just starting on this guy—him, in row 'J' next to Minnie. The stuff's on screen. All you've got to do is read it out—not too fast."

"No problem."

Ellie whispered a few words to Murray to explain the switch, then made way for Jeremy at the mike and bustled out. She had the call switched through to her office.

"This is Ellie Ray. How can I help you?"

"Sergeant Dan Miller, New Hampshire State Police. As I told the young man I was speaking to, I have to speak to Mrs. Anderson in person."

"I'm afraid Mrs. Anderson is in a...in a religious service right now. But I'm a very good friend of hers. If there's any way I can be of help to you or to her, I'd be very happy."

She heard him hesitate, then decide.

"Well," he began, obviously not relishing the task he had to perform, "I'm afraid I have some tragic news. I'm calling from the county morgue. Mrs. Anderson's husband was fatally injured in a traffic accident two hours ago..."

At first Joanna tried to tell herself it was a joke. Or she had misheard. Every instinct strove to deny that what she thought was happening could really be happening. Like the victim of some sudden catastrophe, she was paralyzed by disbelief.

It started when Ellie took back the microphone from the young man who'd been struggling to keep the show going for the last five minutes. "Listen," she'd said to Murray with a new urgency in her voice, "I've just had the police on the phone. Something's come up. It's that Anderson woman...I'm getting her bio up...first name Eileen, comes from Springfield...has some problem with a twin sister who died when they were kids...Now listen to me, Murray, her husband just got killed on the interstate...Now this is what we're going to do..."

Joanna slipped a hand under her wig as though her earpiece might be somehow malfunctioning. She refused to believe what she was hearing. They could not possibly be about to do this awful thing. Not even these people could be as heartless as that.

Ellie's voice buzzed on in her ear.

"It's *got* to bring Joyce Pardoe back into play. Once this gets into the newsletters, she's sure to improve on that last offer. We could even get an auction going between her and the Thomases..."

Joanna was only vaguely aware that her mouth was hanging open as she listened to this woman cold-bloodedly planning to boost the sale of her real estate by exploiting a tragic bereavement. Even then she couldn't believe that Murray would go for this. She watched him sitting imperturbably, finishing off a rambling answer to a question from some man near the front, betraying nothing of the callousness and greed being poured into his ear. Surely he would just ignore his wife's words and carry on. He wouldn't go for this. He couldn't.

"The husband's name is Jeffrey Dean...Jeffrey Dean Anderson...Salesman—that's all I've got, nothing about what he sells...Two kids, teenagers, Shirley and Richard..."

Murray signaled for the next question. Merle had an object for him, a brooch or clip or something of the sort. She started across the stage and Murray held out his hands for it as he always did.

He froze without warning. His whole body remained rigid for some seconds; then he inhaled a shuddering breath and slumped back in his chair as though unconscious.

People were on their feet in alarm, thinking he was ill. Merle hurried toward him, but quickly realized that all was well as he pulled himself forward and stood up. He raised his arms theatrically, and the audience watched, puzzled, as he placed his fingers on his temples in an attitude of intense and painful concentration. His breathing remained heavy for some moments more. Then, still blindfolded, he spoke.

"Jeffrey...Jeffrey Dean Anderson," he intoned, "is speaking to me now as I stand before you.... Eileen, he has a message for Eileen...he says she's here...he has a message for you, Eileen, and the children...Shirley, Richard...He wants you to know that he loves you, all of you, and he doesn't want you to be sad...he has simply...crossed over..."

People ran to help the thin, drawn-looking woman who had collapsed in the aisle.

Outside, Joanna ran through the slim, tall silver birches until she had to stop, doubled over, retching from disgust and nausea.

Afterward she walked briskly to the ludicrously named Clouds Wing, one of the two hotel blocks on the compound—wooden built, plain and overpriced. There she paused only to pick up the few possessions she'd brought with her, and to check again that she had the whole episode securely on tape.

Then she picked up her car keys and hurried to the parking lot.

Sam Towne was watching an upturned plastic pudding container crawl crablike back and forth across the smooth surface of the laboratory floor.

The technical name for the device was a tychoscope, derived from the Greek *tukhe*, meaning “chance,” and *skopion*, meaning “to examine.” The prototype had been invented by a Frenchman, Pierre Janin, in the late seventies. It rested on two wheels set parallel to each other and a fixed pivot leg, enabling it to move in a straight line either forward or backward, or rotate clockwise or counterclockwise.

All these movements were radio controlled by a random event generator (REG) in the next room. An REG was essentially no more than an electronic coin-tossing machine, its circuitry governed by some unpredictable physical process such as radioactive decay or thermal electron motion. A computer, programmed to sample this process at preset intervals, generated arbitrary series of numbers or movements accordingly.

The tychoscope's next move, in consequence, was always anybody's guess. Statistically there was a known probability that it would make any one of the possible moves open to it, just as a coin, every time it is tossed, has a 50/50 chance of coming down heads or tails. Over ten, a hundred, or a thousand tosses it will come down approximately half the time heads and half tails. That is the law of probability.

Yet what Sam and his assistant, Pete Daniels, were witnessing was a consistent and dramatic violation of that law. The little pudding-container robot was literally huddling in one corner of the floor. Each time the REG switched it to a new tack that looked like taking it away, the next few switches would inexorably bring it back to the same area.

Sam and Pete exchanged a look, neither concealing his excitement from the other. Both knew that this was a historic moment: a repeatable demonstration, under laboratory conditions, of something utterly inexplicable.

“Okay, let's move the cage,” Sam said.

There was an anxious twittering from the fifteen seven-day-old chicks as their world swung up into the air and came to rest two yards from where it had been. It took only a few moments for them to reorient themselves and begin calling for the featureless moving object that they had been conditioned to regard as “mom,” and which was now farther away from them than they found comfortable.

Pete came back from the next room with a printout from the computer. He handed it to Sam in silence. The numbers spoke for themselves.

“That's almost three times,” Sam said, doing a quick bit of mental arithmetic. “The goddamn thing spent three times longer hanging around the cage when the chicks were in it than when it was empty.”

“In-fucking-credible.”

“But true.”

They both turned as the chirping of the little birds grew more agitated. The tychoscope was making a turn of almost three hundred and sixty degrees. Sam caught Pete's eye, each of them knowing the thought that had shot through the other's head, followed by a jolt of self-reproach at such a cockeyed notion. It was absurd to think, as they both instinctively though briefly had, in terms of the

tychoscope actively searching for its brood. It was a mindless machine without even the pretensions of ratiocinative thought of the simplest computer program. Any kind of program was an ordered process and the whole point of the process by which the little robot's movements were controlled was that it lacked all order.

The only possible force causing the machine to move as it had been moving for the past twenty minutes was the will of the tiny caged chicks to keep it near to them. Like most baby birds, they had adopted as their mother the first moving object they had come in contact with on hatching from the egg. After their birth they had spent one hour every day for six days in the presence of the robot as it meandered on its random path. Today was the first time they had been caged and therefore unable to follow the machine in their accustomed way.

So, instead, they were making it come to them.

An hour later Pete brought in another cage of chicks to replace the first. The only difference was that these chicks had never seen the tychoscope before and therefore had no attachment to it. To establish this Sam did a twenty-minute control run during which the robot, as the computer printout confirmed, followed its normal random path while the chicks in their cage paid it no attention.

“Okay, Pete, pull the blinds, will you?” Sam said as soon as he had satisfied himself about the result. The lab became pitch dark, and the twittering of the chicks grew agitated.

“See what I mean?” Sam said. “They hate the dark during waking hours. It throws them into a panic.”

The noise that the chicks were making certainly bore him out. They subsided somewhat as a small flame leapt from Pete's lighter, which he touched to a candle. He attached the candle to a clip on top of the tychoscope, which had remained stationary on the far side of the floor since the end of the previous run.

When the candle was in place—the only source of illumination in the room—Sam pressed the switch on his remote. The tychoscope began to move.

The chicks clamored for the light to come to them...

“I'll never eat one of those things again,” Pete murmured as they analyzed the data after several runs. “The little buggers are magicians.”

Sam smiled. “Then you'd better become a vegetarian,” he said, “because anything more awake than a carrot could pull off what you just saw. And some people have theories about carrots.”

“You want to run a test with a basket of vegetables?”

“Nah—people would think we were nuts.”

“They already do.”

“Yeah, well,” Sam shrugged, “maybe we are.”

Pete shot a covert glance in his boss's direction. Sometimes he didn't understand Sam. By rights he should have been ecstatic at the results they were getting, but a sudden despondency seemed to have settled on him, as though everything they were doing was a waste of time.

“What's up?” he asked. “You found a flaw in the procedure, or what?”

“There's no flaw.” Sam's voice was flat.

“So why the long face?”

There was a flash of annoyance in Sam's look that warned the younger man to back off and not

push the question further. But Pete wasn't in this job because he liked being told what to do or what to think. He respected Sam, liked him, and admired what he was doing, because of that he wanted to be taken into his confidence.

“Don't look at me like that,” he said, aware of a slightly whining note of protest in his voice that he disliked. “If there's something on your mind, I'd like to know.”

Sam sighed. It was a form of apology. “It's nothing to do with the experiment.”

“Then what's the problem?”

“The problem is figuring out what, if anything, it all adds up to.”

Joanna had appeared on television only once before. It had been an afternoon talk show following a series of articles she had written about junk diet treatments and the doctors who pushed them. She'd found the experience surprisingly painless. The trick, she realized, was not to perform; it was more effective to underplay than overplay, because the cameras captured everything. Keep your sentences short and the thoughts behind them clear.

Today's show was for the same slot, taped in the morning for transmission that afternoon. Joanna's article about the sleazy tricks at Camp Starburst had provoked the furor she had hoped it would. Now she found herself sitting alongside a male "channeler," a female astrologer, and the author of a book about the ghosts of famous people who, supposedly, still walked the earth. The fifth guest was a psychologist called Sam Towne who was, apparently, doing "scientific research" into the paranormal at Manhattan University.

Joanna found the whole subject distasteful and the program pointless, but her editor had insisted that anything that hyped the magazine's profile, and incidentally hers, could only help circulation.

"Are you saying," one woman from the audience asked, "that it's all a lie, all religion and everything, and there's nothing after death?"

"I'm saying," Joanna replied, "that nobody knows what happens when we die, and anybody who claims to know for sure is a liar—and probably a crook as well."

"But what about religious belief?" the host of the show asked, moving through the audience with his microphone. "Are you saying that all religion belongs in the same category of fraud as what you've been writing about?"

"No, of course I'm not. Religion is a different thing."

"Do you mind if I ask if you have any religious beliefs yourself?"

"I was brought up in a Protestant family, I've never been a big churchgoer, but if you're asking whether I believe in God...I'd be hard pressed to say positively no."

"Can I say something here?" The interruption came from Sam Towne, the psychologist. The host asked him to go on.

"Miss Cross was writing about people who claimed knowledge of the afterlife," Towne said, "specific and detailed knowledge about people who had, as they like to put it, 'passed over.' Now we shouldn't confuse religious belief with that kind of knowledge, or indeed any kind of knowledge in the generally accepted sense. I *know* that I'm sitting in a television studio; so do you. There's no way we can disagree about that. But I may *believe* something about how I come to be here, how the studio comes to be here, how the world in which it exists comes to be here—and you may believe something else. Both our belief systems may be consistent with the facts as we know them, but inconsistent with each other. The phony psychics that Miss Cross was writing about had nothing to do with either religious belief or knowledge. They were running a straightforward confidence trick to make easy money."

Predictably, the other three guests began protesting their agreement: the Camp Starburst affair had been a scandal, but an isolated incident; it should not be used as a brush to tar the whole psychic world.

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