

David Ambrose

Superstition The 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. 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 Campbell 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 Campbell 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 passers-by 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 he was committed to a rational response to all things. Reason and logic, he believed, were the only tools at our disposal in any attempt that we might make to penetrate the mystery of our being; though how far they could take us on that quest was becoming, at least to him, 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 towards him.

A moment later the door was opened by someone tallish with a well groomed mass of thick, dark hair. His eyes too 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 wingtips in a rich burgundy and looked handmade. Sam would have put him in his late thirties.

"Mr Campbell? I'm Sam Towne..."

They didn't shake hands. Campbell 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, thought Sam, 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 Campbell. 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 Campbell, he looked like 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," Campbell 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 taking up any more of your time than I have to," he said, as though by way of reassurance.

Campbell 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?"

Campbell indicated an Italian sofa in oatmeal hessian, 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," he 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..."

Campbell'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. Eight 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, civilised, thoughtful. But he couldn't be sure of anything any more.

"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."

Campbell 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."

Campbell 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," Campbell 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?" Campbell 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."

Campbell frowned. "Look, Dr Towne, my wife is a n 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, Campbell made it clear that he was prepared to defend her against any intrusion or unnecessary worry.

"I understand how all this must sound," Sam began lamely.

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

"You can call up the university."

Campbell 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."

Campbell started across the room towards 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. Campbell 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 a rather odd story..."

He stopped because Sam had gasped audibly. Both he 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 on the verge of passing out.

Sam Towne had not been ready for this.

Something impossible had happened.