



THE CASE OF THE
**CLAIRVOYANT
KID**

A gifted psychic or
a clever con-man?

Garrison Flint

The Case of the Clairvoyant Kid
A Raymond Masters Mystery

BOOK EIGHT

by
Garrison Flint

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PROLOGUE

The Setting

Northwest Arkansas is triple-blessed with the beautiful, natural, rolling hills of the Ozark Mountains, a generally mild climate spread among four still discernible seasons, and populated by a generous portion of old stock - good, helpful, trusting, neighborly people. It was that rare combination of features, which prompted this old writer to relocate to the area from his boyhood home in the less gentle climate of the northern Midwest.

Just over a year ago, my good and ageless friend, retired detective, Raymond Masters (whose most fascinating cases, I turn into novels) came to spend a week at my place, expecting to relax, fish, and enjoy the spectacular view from the second floor deck at the rear of my log home. It sits at the edge of a pine and oak woods, just south of Fayetteville, and an invigorating fifteen minute, uphill walk to the small community of Purdy Crossing. The signs at each edge of town boast a population of 897 – a figure, which I assume, must include all of the folks long since laid to rest in the sprawling, ancient cemetery behind the landmark, Community Church.

Both the community room in the basement of that old church building and the trusting, and marginally superstitious nature of the local residents would play a prominent role in one of Raymond Masters' most interesting investigations – The Case of the Clairvoyant Kid. (And to think, I would have to be away on business while Masters enjoyed my home and had all the fun!)

Garrison Flint

CHAPTER ONE

Day one: Evening

It had been an impressive evening and although Masters was not prone to accept psychic ability as a reality, he had enjoyed the program at the Community Room. It left the old detective in him wondering how the feats had been accomplished, but by the time he had walked the mile back to the cabin – and he definitely preferred that downhill direction to the earlier and more effort –filled walk ‘up’ to town – his thoughts had given over to the wonders of the early summer night sky and the glittering stars that lay so far beyond. He had no explanation for them, either. The air was fresh and the view was clear. The gentle breeze and the dampness of the warm evening spread the refreshing scent of pine up and down the road.

The young psychic, Hans Hanzik, (both soft ‘a’s) was a handsome fifteen-year-old with long, flowing, blond, hair and an immediately endearing smile. Dressed only in scarlet, satin, pants – that seemed dangerously tight to Masters – he sat cross-legged on a small, platform which was draped in black satin. Two spotlights filtered with hues, which highlighted his golden hair and deep tan, provided the only illumination. He had been introduced by his guardian, Evan Brown, a distinguished looking, articulate, middle aged man with graying hair and a thin moustache. His slight accent, Masters assumed, was part of the act.

When the brief introduction was over, Evan strode from the stage leaving Hans alone. The boy stretched and moved his shoulders, rotating his head as if to relax himself. He then

rested his hands in his lap. Leisurely, he smiled out across the audience, then took several deep breaths, closed his eyes and appeared to enter a serene trance. After several silent moments, he began speaking in a clear, strong voice. He too had a slight, though enchanting accent, not immediately identifiable. He addressed individual members of the audience – all local residents whom he supposedly (and most likely) did not know.

He revealed personal information about them - aches, pains, current concerns, childhood memories and answered questions he “felt” were on their minds. Each person in turn attested in amazement to the lad’s accuracy.

Toward the end of the program he singled out several people for predictions. Henry Mayfield, a local farmer, would win a contest he had entered – several thousand dollars was to arrive in the mail the next day. Margie Bloom – a retired English teacher - would hear that her book of poetry had been purchased by an east coast publisher. Rev. Williams would receive a substantial cash contribution for the church from a woman who had grown up in Purdy Crossing but had not been heard from in over fifty years. There were others, less dramatic. Bonnie Yates would find her lost watch under the bleachers in section ‘A’ out at the ball field and Jerry Baker would find his wallet in the bedroom closet at his girlfriend’s house – that raised a ripple of chuckles through the audience and set the poor 15-year-old’s ears ablaze in shades that surpassed even the psychic’s colorful outfit.

It made a good show, particularly, since it had been free. Masters wondered how they supported themselves. He wondered why they had selected tiny Purdy Crossing as a stop on their tour. He wondered about the boy and his relationship to Evan Brown. He wondered which, if any, of the predictions would come true and if so, how and why. He wondered . . . well, he just wondered – retired or not, he was still a detective through and through!

Back at the house he put on a pot of coffee and rifled the fridge for some savory morsel – a large slice of the still uncut strawberry pie would do nicely. [After all, I have to keep up the old guy's strength. I depend on him for my living!]

He settled into a comfortably large recliner in the great room, placing the coffee on the table to his left and the pie on the broad arm of the chair. He took out the program he had been handed as he entered the Community Room. Unable to immediately locate his reading glasses – the reason he had not perused it during the program – he held the sheet at arm's length and squinted. Once set, Masters was not inclined to attempt the extrication of his considerable bulk in order to carry out a search. Anyway, squinting from a distance seemed both more creative and natural than relying on manmade lenses. (That was his story and he'd stick with it at least until the glasses turned up!)

The name, Hans Hanzik, was hardly melodious though easily pronounced and the name certainly lent an air of old world mystery. The program was presented by E. B. Enterprises, referring to Evan Brown, Masters surmised. The young man's bio was fascinating. His mother had been from Holland and his father from Bosnia. They had both met tragic deaths during the war there. From age five, Hans, who had been rendered deaf in another accident, lived in the slovenly conditions typical of the orphanages in that part of the world. From an early age, he had demonstrated an ability to "see into the hearts and minds of others." When he was ten, Evan Brown, a successful business man, according to the program notes, was touring the area after the war and was so taken with Hans that he gained guardianship and brought him back to the states. The article went on to say that, "the boy's psychic powers blossomed exponentially under Evan's compassionate care" and the decision was made to "share the young man's gift with the World."

Masters put the program aside and attacked the pie – it was delicious. The same could not be said for his coffee. Masters could never remember (so he claimed) whether it was one tablespoon or one teaspoon of coffee per cup of water. He solved that dilemma by just pouring – right from the can – an amount that seemed sufficient. (It seldom was!)

The Grandfather clock struck nine – far too early to turn in. He grumbled his way through a second cup of coffee, wondering why, can after can, he always happened onto such inferior blends. He was headed out to the deck when the doorbell rang. With Flint out of town for the week, his first inclination was to ignore it since surely it would not be for him. His curiosity overpowered that initial impulse and he turned and proceeded to the front door. Much to his surprise, there stood Evan Brown and Hans Hanzik.

“Mr. Masters?” Evan asked, extending a hand. “Detective Raymond Masters?” he continued as if to clarify.

Masters shook his hand.

“Yes, I’m Raymond Masters. May I be of some service?” his puzzlement clearly showing in his tone.

By then the evening air had turned relatively cool so he motioned the two inside and drew the door closed behind them. They stood in the entry hall.

“We are sorry to bother you so late, but we find ourselves in need of your services.”

“I’m sorry, Sir. I’m here on vacation and not inclined to lift one finger in the direction of work for the next ten days. Perhaps the local police or the sheriff.”

“If you will be kind enough to give us just five minutes, please. Then, if you want, we will leave you to your holiday.”

Although his approach was much like that of a telemarketer, always cordial Masters sighed and nodded, reluctantly showing them into the great room where they took seats. The boy (Dressed in jeans, a red shirt, and a jean jacket, remained silent. Evan explained their situation.

“There have been threats against Hans’ life. We thought that by visiting smaller towns we would seclude ourselves from whoever is making them. It had generally worked well until this morning.”

“What’s the nature of the threat?” Masters asked more out of courtesy than genuine interest.

“It’s always nebulous, by phone, and without any

foundation in motive – just that if Hans doesn't return to Europe, he will be killed.”

Hans continued to remain quiet – inappropriately unmoved by the explanation, Masters thought.

“Have there been actual attempts in the past?”

“Yes, in New York City and Atlanta several months ago – unexplained accidents the police called them, but we are sure they were attempts gone awry.”

The man's vocabulary suggested both intelligence and education – an unlikely background for a tour promoter. The lad's lack of concern suggested something was not as it was being presented. Masters was hooked.

“What would be the nature of this protection you're seeking?” he asked.

“I would ask that Hans stay with you and that you escort him when he needs to be elsewhere.”

“I don't and won't carry a gun. So, if it's that kind of protection you're after, you'll need to look elsewhere. I'm not the bodyguard type.”

“Hans always senses when danger is imminent. What we need is someone with the know-how and creative instincts to innovate on a moment's notice. There is no doubt you are what we need.”

Masters ignored the obviously intentional complement. The man's ready response to the question seemed to have come far too easily – without having to think about or formulate an answer – but, if they had been through all of this before, that might be reasonable.

“I'm outlandishly expensive, Sir,” Masters said. “I'm sure you can do better in that department.”

“I'm a wealthy man, Mr. Masters. You'll take the assignment then?”

Masters quickly understood that Evan was used to getting what he wanted but there remained several questions.

“May I ask how this tour is supported?”

Although the question had been directed at Evan, Hans chose to answer.

“We take donations and pledges for the European Orphans' Foundation – E O F – an organization Mr. Brown started after he visited us over there.”

The boy's English was flawless. His charming accent added allure to his underlying mystique and natural attractiveness. He continued. "We pay our expenses from that – about three percent of the revenue, I believe."

He looked at Evan who confirmed the figure with a nod.

"It is important work. So many children are parentless – homeless. If I weren't doing this, I would feel so guilty for having been the one Mr. Brown chose to rescue."

Masters wasn't a psychic but he understood that there was nothing insincere about the boy's words. In fact, there seemed to be something more genuine about him than his benefactor.

Masters addressed Evan directly.

"And your business, Sir? May I ask how you came to be so wealthy?"

"Certainly. That is no secret. I own a public relations firm for companies going international. When a business expands from the United States into a new country, my firm prepares the way – sets the stage – makes the important contacts and connections."

"And the name of your company?" the old detective asked, pointedly

"Why, Mr. Masters. You're going to check up on me."

"I am very thorough, Sir. I want to know all the players inside and out."

Evan took two cards from his coat pocket and handed them to Masters, one at a time.

"This is my company – Business Front, Inc. – and this is my" . . . he paused and glanced lovingly at Hans – "Our, foundation – The European Orphan's Foundation."

Masters accepted the cards with an appreciative nod, slipped them into the pocket of his sweater, and then turned to Hans.

"My condolences on the loss of your parents, Hans. Life must have been very difficult."

“Thank you. Yes. It’s like a dream now. Sometimes I think I should go back from time to time and live there again to keep the memory alive.”

“You were deaf, I understand.”

“Yes, Sir. From the time I was five. I’m told it was caused by a blow to my head during an accident – the bus we were riding in was hit by a mortar or something. I don’t remember about it. Mr. Brown arranged surgery for me in New York. It was a true miracle. I went to sleep unhearing and when I awoke I heard. It was such a new sensation – like I had moved into a new dimension. So much rushed upon me at once I was overwhelmed and just began crying. Mr. Brown sat beside me on my bed and held me close to him. The first words I can remember ever hearing were his, when he told me he loved me and that he was going to adopt me. It was so much all at once. It took days for me to take it all in.”

The boy smiled his wonderfully natural smile into Evan’s face. He clearly loved the man and felt beholding to him. Evan’s response did not match the lad’s in intensity but he acknowledged the obvious intention of the look.

“May I ask about your parents?” Masters asked, realizing the boy was brilliant beyond what would be expected, considering his background.

“They were professors at the University. Mother was a nuclear physicist and Father a neurobiologist.”

Masters was unfamiliar with the latter term but felt certain Hans could fill in every detail.

“How long will you be here in Northwest Arkansas? I assume that would be my tenure with you.”

Evan answered. “That’s right. Ten more days. We are scheduled to move on to the Los Angeles area on the 21st.”

“And during those ten days you will be doing what?”

Hans spoke.

“I will be doing individual Readings for people and give one more, large group, program at the Community Room in the church.”

“Individual Readings?”

“Private sessions, “Evan explained. “By appointment.”

“For which the clients pay,” Masters assumed aloud, more than asked.

“Yes,” Hans said. “That’s our main source of income for E O F”

Masters pressed.

“Tell me about the nature of your psychic powers.”

“Gift. It’s a gift of reception, not really a power,” Hans snapped, almost defensively. “I’ve always had feelings about people – but the gift didn’t fully develop until I reached puberty – then, bam! All of a sudden it was there. It was one more thing that happened about the time Mr. Brown took me in permanently. I was really overwhelmed by everything for a time.”

“Do you receive feelings or hear voices or see images or what?” Masters asked, needing to have a better feel for how the lad operated. “I’m afraid I’m pretty dumb when it comes to this psychic stuff.”

Hans smiled and chuckled. In that brief moment, he appeared for the first time to be a typical teenager. He then grew serious as he attempted an answer.

“I can’t explain how it happens. I just know that when I clear my mind, like you saw me do this evening, I receive impressions – almost like messages. I just repeat what forms in my mind. I can take no personal credit for it. The impressions just arrive. It’s more like I’m a go between.”

“Between what and what?” Masters pressed.

“Between the source of the impression and the person.”

“And that source would be what?”

“What’s the source of the stars? What’s the source of this planet?” What’s the source of beauty or the soul? I don’t have the answer to the source of my gift any more than I have the answers to those questions.”

Masters felt that response was the only truly rehearsed one Hans had given. It was certainly hard to argue against, and had been designed to lay to rest all such invasive, though logically expected questions. Masters nodded and remained silent.

Evan spoke.

“We have his things in the car. I’ll just fetch them, then, if you have no further questions.”

He took his checkbook from his inside coat pocket, opened it and tore out a pre-written check, handing it to Masters. “I assume this \$25,000 retainer will cover things until I receive your bill.”

Putting the check on an end table without comment, Masters turned to Hans.

“Are you sure that you’re okay with this – staying here alone with an old codger – a total stranger?”

“Oh, you’re not a total stranger, Sir. I’m a Mystery nut, myself, and I’ve read all the Garrison Flint books about your famous cases. I can hardly believe that I’m standing right here in his house talking to you. Also, I have received very good impressions from you as we have been talking here.”

“Impressions? I’m interested!”

“Dependable, honest, lonelier than you care to admit although generally a very happy person, mentally energetic, a penchant for calories, and in general a hoot to be around.”

It was nothing he could not have gleaned from other sources or have been instructed in ahead of time.

“And, oh yes, one thing more,” Hans added, “The reading glasses you lost are in the pocket of that atrocious, orange, flowered, shirt you wore on the plane that brought you here. It’s in the hamper in your room, I believe.”

Now that was impressive – if true – and Masters had a feeling it would be true. He didn’t have to buy the whole psychic line to accept the assignment. The boy, the man, the mission all intrigued him. He didn’t trust Evan. He didn’t buy the psychic phenomenon although he believed Hans believed in himself. He sensed a child-like sincerity and genuineness about Hans who seemed to be in great need of something other than just protection. Somebody just might get more than he paid for.

“Very well, then,” Masters said at last. “There is a room next to mine on the second floor.”

Several suitcases were brought inside. Local phone numbers were exchanged and the next day’s itinerary discussed. The suitcases were delivered to the boy’s temporary quarters. Evan left. Masters, accompanied by

Hans, went in search of his elusive reading glasses. They were soon retrieved.

Masters held up the shirt spreading it to its full width.

“Atrocious? How can you consider this lovely Hawaiian print, atrocious?”

He smiled at Hans and patted him on the back. Hans clearly liked that and returned the smile. He raised his hands as if to claim innocence.

“Atrocious wasn’t my word, Sir. It came from the Universe.”

Masters chuckled and held it up for one final, studied, look.

“So, then, the Universe aside, what does Hans Hanzik think of this colorful garment?”

“Tent-like? Sir,” the boy said, a question in his voice, chiding the oversized old gentleman. It was a playful side of the lad that had not previously been displayed. Better yet it suggested a level of trust and comfort.

Masters knuckle-rubbed the boy’s head. Again, it was clearly enjoyed without resistance.

Masters closed his eyes and spread his fingers against his own temples.

“I am receiving an impression, myself.”

Hans smiled in anticipation of whatever tomfoolery was about to occur.

“There is a young man – a blond young man who is very much in need of a snack before bed . . . Wait! There is more! I see strawberry pie and a large glass of milk. It will be found inside a large, white, cold, box in the kitchen.”

Masters playfully opened just one eye. Hans laughed out loud.

“You are very good, Sir. My preference was actually peach, but strawberry will do in a pinch.”

They chuckled their way down stairs and were soon sitting across from each other at the kitchen table. Masters felt it only hospitable to join the lad in another piece of pie. Guests, after all, should never eat alone!

With the leavings of the coffee looking thick and angry in the pot, he thought better of it and poured milk for both of them.

Ever forthright, Masters made an observation.

“It appears that you loosened up considerably as soon as Evan left. Is that something I should know about?”

Hans put down his fork and sat back in his chair.

“Evan is a wonderful man. I owe him everything – my life probably – kids don’t last long in those orphanages. But he is pretty much all business. He isn’t inclined to joke around or enjoy humor. That just isn’t a part of life with him.”

“So, I guess you have to depend on your friends for that.”

“Friends?” Hans repeated the word as a question. “How can I have friends? I travel constantly. I can’t even remember ever having a real friend. At the orphanage, the other kids made fun of me because I was deaf and anyway, you didn’t want to get close to anybody there. Like I said, kids died every week.”

He sighed and returned to his pie. Masters topped off the boy’s glass with more milk.

“Thank you, Sir. You’re everything I believed you would be – kind and generous and fun-loving.”

He caught Master’s glance for a long moment and then averted his eyes back to his drink.

“There is this one thing we have to work out.” Masters said, his twinkling eyes incongruent with his super serious tone and facial expression.

Hans stopped and looked at him, his brow furrowed at the double message.

“We have to find a way to get you to drop this ‘Sir stuff’ and call me Ray.”

“Oh, I don’t think I could do that, Sir. I don’t think Mr. Brown would approve and I would be uncomfortable. I mean, after all, you’re the Raymond Masters.”

“And that’s another thing that interests me,” the old detective said, a question on his face.

“What? That you’re Raymond Masters?”

“No, you clown! That you call your guardian, ‘Mr. Brown’ instead of dad or pop or father or even Evan.”

“Like I said, Mr. Brown is a very good and generous

man but he is distant. He is just not comfortable with close relationships. I suppose it's why he never married. He prefers 'Mr. Brown'. It's fine with me. A name's just a name, you know?"

"My point exactly and mine is Ray. I hope you'll try it out."

Hans nodded – not convincingly, but he nodded – as he pressed the remaining crumbs of pie crust between the tines of his fork, clearly savoring them once they reached his mouth. Masters mused to himself that the boy's plate seemed cleaner after he had eaten from it than before he started. It was probably a vestige of his hungrier days at the orphanage.

"You've had a lot of things to adjust to during the past few years. Are you doing okay with it all now?" Masters asked, again trying to open a crack into the boy's history.

"Dr. Watson helped me a lot – the psychiatrist Mr. Brown arranged for me to see in New York when we first arrived here in the States."

"Dr. Watson?" Masters asked, smiling his disbelief in Hans' direction.

"Yeah. Ironic, huh? Me a mystery nut and my shrink turns out to be Dr. Watson."

"I suppose you must have felt right 'at Holmes' with him, then," Masters quipped.

"That was really terrible, Mr. Masters. I love it! We don't joke much, like I said."

"Well, get used to it. Some say that the pun is the lowest form of humor. In my experience those who say that are generally the ones who are too slow witted to see a pun's possibility."

"So, if I were to say the pie was berry, berry good, could I join your punsters club?"

"Signed, sealed and delivered, you rascal. I think we are going to get along just fine."

Masters returned to the original topic.

"Do you mind talking about the sessions with the psychiatrist?"

“No, Sir, Ray.”

“Well, that’s at least getting closer,” Masters said with a sigh and a playful shake of his head.

Hans smiled, shrugged, and continued.

“It was mostly about living in the present and setting the fears and terrible memories of the past aside without denying them. Dr. Watson is the one who taught me how to clear my mind – to enter my trance, if you prefer that term.”

“You appeared to enter that state quickly and easily this evening.”

“Post hypnotic suggestion – a signal I give myself. I’m well practiced at it, needing to do it several dozen times a day at the Readings, you know.”

Masters moved on.

“You speak such excellent English. What’s the story? I can’t place the accent and I’m usually pretty good with accents.”

“The story is that my mother and father did not speak each other’s native languages but both spoke fluent English, so I guess my early experiences with sounds and words were mostly English, delivered through two different accents. The Orphanage was run by an Englishwoman – a missionary I suppose you could say. So, though I couldn’t hear, I learned to read her lips which helped me expand my vocabulary. English, with this one of a kind accent, is really my first and only language.”

“Fascinating!” Masters said.

Hans shrugged his shoulders.

“That’s just how it is.”

“So, no friends, you say?”

“Right. No friends, I’m sad to say.”

“I suppose there must be a girl friend or so, here and there, though?”

“I wish! Can you believe I’m fifteen and a half and I’ve never even kissed a girl – not even on her cheek? I think about them all the time, you know?”

“Cheeks?”

“No, girls!”

It brought another chuckle.

“It seems that I can still remember something about that

back when I was your age.”

Hans suddenly seemed to become uncomfortable with the topic.

“Well, the way the local young ladies looked at you this evening, I’d think they’d be knocking down doors to get to you.”

“Sometimes they have, actually. Mr. Brown has them run off before I get to talk with them. He doesn’t seem to understand about that side of my life. I suppose he still thinks of me as the little ten-year-old he first met.”

“Well,” Masters began, “It appears to me, then, that we have ten days in which to do something about all that.”

“Ten days? DO something?? Really!!!”

“Let’s see what happens. Don’t you have some feeling about it?”

“Oh, I have feelings, but believe me they aren’t psychic!”

It was a good way to put the topic to rest for the time being.

“What is your citizenship situation?” Masters asked.

“Triple – in a way – until I’m twenty-one – then I have to choose a county, I guess. I have both the Netherlands and Bosnia because of my parents, and now the United States – thanks to Mr. Brown.”

“What do you see in your future and I intended no psychic referenced there?”

Hans smiled.

“I don’t know. I’d like to go to college and study psychology and philosophy – preferably at an all girl’s school!”

Hans broke into a full belly laugh at his own little joke. It was infectious and soon Masters was chuckling himself wet cheeked as well. It was good to see the boy laugh.

Senses regained, Masters asked the most serious question of the night.

“The threats? You seem to take them so

calmly. Aren't you concerned? Don't you wonder why – when – how?"

"I've always felt danger when it was approaching. It was that way at the times of the accidents on the East coast. I sensed a warning in plenty of time to see what was happening and avoid it."

"Can you be more specific?"

"In New York City, a cab veered out of control and crossed the sidewalk where I would have been walking had I not 'felt' I should stop and turn around. In Atlanta, it was the bank of lights overhead on the stage. They are all attached to heavy steel beams held up by ropes. I always like to spend a few minutes and check out every stage and auditorium before my programs. I was standing in the middle of the one in Atlanta and was 'told' to jump to the floor over the footlights. I did, just as the lights crashed to the floor. They weighed over a thousand pounds. I'd have been killed for sure but it couldn't happen, you see.

"So, I'm really not frightened about the threats – not for myself. I sometimes worry about the safety of the people who are near me. I wonder if I will be able to warn them in time."

"Why is Evan so concerned, then? I assume I am not the first protector he has hired for you."

"No, you're not. I'm really not sure why. I've wondered about it. I'd like to think that I'm just that precious to him, you know? That he wants to go ahead and make certain."

"Yes, I think I understand how you must feel. You're undoubtedly right about that."

Masters was certainly not going to insert any doubts about the sincerity of the boy's guardian's love.

"I have two more questions and then I'll let you go to bed."

"Shoot."

"Well, first, how do you manage to keep that wonderful tan when you seem to spend most of your time inside?"

"I get out into the sun whenever I can but quite honestly it comes from a jar."

"I've heard rumors of such things. It must really work well I guess."

"Yeah. It takes a lot of work, though. Mr. Brown says

my image is very important. I have to be, as he puts it, immediately appealing. The tan, the outfit, the bare torso and feet, the crossed legs – it's all part of the simple, innocent, image he has developed for me."

"Your hair is really blond or is that from a bottle as well?"

"My hair is really blond – Dutch Boy Blond is what Mr. Brown calls it. I have to admit it gets touched up with highlights from a bottle. I'm not a fan of long hair like this. It's hot in the summer and itchy all year long. I don't like to feel it dragging across my shoulders. It has to be shampooed every morning and it takes forever to dry. . . . You had a second question?"

"Oh, yes! I assume you work out regularly to keep your upper body looking so fit."

"Just a little with weights three times a week and push-ups and sit-ups every night. Mr. Brown says I need to maintain a tennis player's physique – nicely rippled but not overly muscled. I need to look natural like a regular kid my age. I have to admit that I really do like the way I look."

"And you should! Any suggestions for me?"

"Well, from what I can see, Ray, Sir, you are also nicely rippled – probably chocolate rippled, strawberry rippled, marshmallow rippled"

Again, Hans sent himself into rills of laughter. Masters was going to enjoy his time with this young man.

"I guess there is a third, more serious question, I overlooked a moment ago. What do you do about school?"

"Mr. Brown worked it out with a home schooling group. They send me modules. When I finish one I take a test and then move on to the next one. There are four modules for each year of high school. I just have three left. So far, I have all 'A's. I really like to work on the assignments. I do it before bed at night. It keeps my mind off other things."

"Other soft, curvaceous things, I assume,"

Masters added.

“Well, curvaceous for sure. I’m still waiting to find out firsthand about the soft part. You ever been married, Detective, Mr. Masters, Ray, Sir – whoever you are?”

It initiated a good chuckle for Masters well before Hans finished stumbling through the possibilities.

“No. I’m afraid my career got in the way. It is probably my only real regret in life.”

“Still time, you know,” Hans said, all quite seriously. “That’s what I tell Mr. Brown. That may be mostly selfish, though. I’d like to have a mother. But, remember, there’s still time.”

“Well, I seldom rule out any possibility, Hans. Time will tell, I suppose.”

Hans was not finished with the topic.

“The problem with marriage is that when one dies it must leave the other so lonely. I’ve always told myself it was best for them, at least, that my parents died together. Not for me, understand, but for them.”

“I’m not sure how to respond to that,” Masters said.

“No response necessary. You’ll learn I have numerous quirky little pieces of philosophy floating around in this head of mine. I’ve really never been very close to many married people. That sounds strange, but it’s how things have been for me. There was Dr. Watson, and when he died, I went through a period when all I could think about was how sad his wife must be. I’d never met her but I felt bad for her. It was sort of the same when I learned Dr. Carey died – he was the surgeon who restored my hearing. I didn’t know him as well but he had been so important in my life, you know. It was like the universe was taking my few certainties – my anchors – away from me.”

“I wasn’t aware they had both died.”

“Yeah. All the important people in my life die tragically, it seems. I worry about Mr. Brown.”

“Tragically?”

“Yeah. My parents and the doctors.”

“May I ask what happened to the doctors?”

“Sure. I can talk about it now. Dr. Watson would be proud of me for it. He was killed in a subway accident – fell off

the ramp late at night and was run over by an express train. Dr. Carey died in a boating accident. I was on his boat once – a forty-foot luxury job. It blew up while he was on his way to vacation in the Bahamas.”

“Well, I’d certainly agree those qualify as tragic deaths. How did you learn about them?”

“By accident, really – no pun intended, there.”

The boy managed a quick smile that soon faded.

“I happened to read about Dr. Carey’s accident in a Sunday newspaper when we were in Florida. It upset me so, that I asked Mr. Brown if I could go see Dr. Watson again. It was then that he told me about his death. It was a really bad time there for a month or so. I felt like my support system was vanishing. If my hearing had a set-back, there was no Dr. Carey and when I needed to sort things out there was no longer a Dr. Watson.”

“Your life story just keeps getting more and more – what shall I call it – convoluted, I guess.”

“I still have my mission in life. That’s what’s kept me going through it all, I think.”

“How would you describe your mission – in just a few words – just in general?”

There was an extended, thoughtful pause. Clearly what would follow was not rehearsed

“My mission is to improve the human condition by helping people feel better about themselves and their future. It is a bit perplexing sometimes that I almost never receive impressions of doom or gloom – you might say – about the people I do Readings for. It’s usually just good stuff. I can’t explain that. I mean I’m not so naive as to think that bad stuff doesn’t sometimes happen to those people out in their future, but I don’t seem to tune into it. I could probably be of more help if I could. I could forewarn them, maybe.”

“Fascinating!”

“What’s fascinating, Detective, Ray, Sir?”

“Well, Hans, Boy, hottie – whoever you are - just most everything about you. You are mature beyond your years. You have survived the most tortuous

childhood I can imagine and seem to have emerged relatively unscarred. You live your life selflessly for the benefit of others. If you could just cook, I'd propose on the spot."

Hans laughed out loud.

"No offense, Ray, Sir, but you just aren't my type, if you understand what I mean."

"That soft, curvaceous thing again, I suppose."

"Sorry, but I'm afraid so. Someday I'd like to become a good cook. Food is probably more important to me than to lots of folks – it was such a rare commodity as I was growing up."

"Well, I, of course, have no way of relating to a condition in which food is more important to me than to most folks!"

Masters lovingly rubbed the large, permanent, prominence which intervened between his chin and belt.

Hans nodded, smiled, and stood, beginning to clear the dishes.

"Hand wash or dishwasher?" he asked.

"I'm so used to washing dishes under running water every time I finish with a plate or glass that I'm quite sure I'd have no idea how to locate the dishwasher, let alone run it."

"That bachelor thing, I guess."

"I guess."

"I need to be getting to bed," Hans said. "Tomorrow is a very full day. Readings all morning and another large group program in the evening. How are we going to do this? I feel uncomfortable with anybody extra in the room when I'm doing a Reading."

"Rest assured that I will not intrude on your privacy. Where will you be doing your private sessions?"

"We have a room prepared at the motel – second floor, southwest corner."

"The motel is about a mile east of here. It looks like I will be getting plenty of exercise during these next ten days."

"That's right. You don't drive do you? May I ask why that is?"

Masters stood and turned so Hans could view his full-length profile.

"Envision fitting this behind a steering wheel, son."

Hans snorted.

“I see. You’ll have to excuse me. I just never thought . . . perhaps I should just shut up and go to bed. I get up at five. It takes me a good hour to shower, do my hair, apply my tan and check for whiskers – which never seem to arrive, by the way. My first appointment is at eight. Will that give us enough time to get around?”

“It should be plenty of time. I think we’ll go into town and catch breakfast at the diner. Then we can walk back downhill to the Motel.”

“I don’t usually mix with the locals, Mr. Masters. Mr. Brown frowns on that.”

“Well, it seems to me that Evan put me in charge of your safety and there is no safer place I can think of than sitting in a café full of friendly people. We don’t have to mix. I understand how that could diminish your image. But Maggie makes the most scrumptious Denver omelets – she calls them Maggie’s Egg Pies – but they are Denver omelets.”

“I can’t remember the last time I ate out in a café. It’s always room service or order in. I’m looking forward to it.”

He finished the dishes, stacked them in the tray to dry and dried his hands.

Masters watched, intrigued at the boy’s diligence.

“Are you quite you’re not interested in becoming a housewife?” he said, kidding the young man.

Hans understood the humorous intention and just grinned.

“Good night, Ray, Sir.” He looked a bit sheepish. “I’m sorry but it seems that ‘Raysir’ is as close as I’m going get.”

Masters could not resist.

“Well, the positive thing about that is that if you should come across a whisker in the morning, you’ll already have your ‘raysir’ handy.”

“Mr. Masters! That was really terrible – perhaps even verging on child abuse – me being just a little

shaver, and all.”

“Go to bed! Now! Scat! Shoooooo! Off with you! Go! Be gone! Vamoose! . . .”

“Are you hinting that you might want me to leave?”

Hans giggled himself up the stairs to Masters’ endless stream of comical directives. Surely there was more to all of this than a delightful, charismatic, fifteen-year-old boy and an aloof guardian who, for some as yet undefined reason, gave Masters the willies. A brilliant, attractive boy snatched from the arms of doom and given back the ability to hear; the ‘accidental’ deaths of the two doctors who had the most to do with the boy’s present, successful, life-situation; nebulous threats with several unsuccessful attempts to harm the boy; a multimillion dollar foundation with which Masters was unfamiliar; and a very wealthy man about which it all revolved. Oh, yes. Masters was hooked!

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CHAPTER TWO

Day Two: Morning

Masters had been up for some time when he heard Hans' alarm go off. That was followed by the groan of all groans – the universal, teenager's prelude to another day.

As Hans had predicted, it took sixty-five minutes of this-ing and that-ing before the young man emerged from his room – perhaps not psychic but accurate.

His earlier reluctance to face consciousness had been replaced with his wonderful smile and an energetic leap from the fifth step of the stairs onto the carpeted floor of the great room. Masters marveled at his prowess – a perfect two-point landing immediately followed by raised arms as if accepting the adulation of an Olympic crowd. Hans spoke first.

“And If I were an iguana you might say . . .”

“Leaping Lizards!” Masters continued with prolonged shaking of his head. “Good morning. Sleep, okay in your new quarters?”

“My quarters are always new, Raysir, but yes. I haven't felt this good in ages. I love it here. I want to thank you for everything.”

“It doesn't appear to me that I've been called upon to do anything yet.”

“Our talk last night was the best one I've had in . . . well, maybe ever. It was like just guy to guy. I've never really had that.”

“I enjoyed our evening together, also. It was a good time. You're bringing a breath of fresh air into on old man's often stale existence.”

“I can’t imagine there could ever be anything stale about your life, Raysir.”

Masters chose not to pursue the topic.

“Ready for a walk up the hill?”

“Sure am! I’ve been looking forward to it ever since I got up. It feels like it’s going to be a wonderful day.”

Hans talked non-stop all the way into town. As they approached the population sign he asked, “What do you suppose Purdy Crossing means?”

Masters was at a loss.

“Usually ‘crossing’ refers to a shallow where a creek or river can be safely forded. There is clearly no creek up here on the top of this hill. I do believe ‘Purdy’ is a well-known, old family name in these parts. Maybe someone at the diner will know.”

“About the diner. I sure hope they just leave me alone. It’s why I don’t ever get to go out. People swarm over me.”

“I predict that the old gentlemen who will be there at this early hour will respect your privacy.”

As they entered the small café they found the predicted gathering of older men at a long table in the center of the room. Most of them looked up and nodded. Several said good morning. One reached his hand toward Hans and said, “My wife and I sure enjoyed your show last evening.”

Hans thanked him. It was easy, pleasant and non-intrusive. The two proceeded to a table toward the rear. The kitchen door swung open and Maggie appeared – 65ish, trying for 30. Masters privately wondered if the liberally applied makeup was for appearances or structural support. He chuckled to himself.

“What?” Hans asked, eager to be a part of anything humorous.

Before Masters could respond – and it is doubtful he would have actually shared such a less than complementary thought out loud – Maggie was at their table.

“Loved those pants last night, Honey,” was her opening volley as she swung a hip in his direction. It was accompanied by a wink that would have surely quickened the lad’s heart had she been a mere fifty years younger. As it was, it just confused him. “Bonnie found her watch right where you said it would be, you know.” Then getting all quite confidential she leaned down and asked, “You don’t happen to know where I might find a good man, do you?”

Hans began to tune into her playful style.

“Oh, Maggie, if I were only ten years older,” came his quick, overly dramatic reply.

With those nine words, he had made a friend for life. She playfully swatted him on the shoulder with her order pad.

“What’ll it be, gentlemen?”

“One of your wonderful, oversized, Maggie Egg Pies for me,” Masters began. “Also, let’s throw in a side of sausage and coffee.”

She turned to Hans.

“I’ll have a Maggie Egg Pie as well, with a large orange juice, please.”

Maggie raised her eyebrows.

“Fame and manners all in the same youngster. What a catch you’re going be, Honey.”

She patted his cheek, then turned and disappeared into the kitchen.

“They certainly are friendly people, here in Purdy Crossing – whatever the name means,” Hans said, beginning to visibly relax about it all.

“So, your prediction seems to have been accurate!”

“They always are. I’ve never made an error at a group program. That sounds like I’m bragging. I didn’t mean it that way.”

“I understand. Facts are facts, right?”

“That’s how I meant it.”

A woman in her mid-thirties who had been sitting across the room put a ten dollar bill on the table and left, hurriedly.

“She must be off her feed,” Masters noted. “She hardly touched a thing on her plate.”

It drew Hans’ attention to her.

“I’ve seen her before. In fact, lots of times before. She seems to show up every once in a while, where I am.”

“Maybe she’s a groupie,” Masters said trying to make light of it.

“I sense that she seems more frightened and uncomfortable than I’d expect a groupie to be,” Hans said seriously, clearly in a quandary about it.

The topic soon moved on to lighter conversation. Maggie returned with the food and drinks. With eyes closed, Masters wafted the aroma toward his face.

“Maggie, my dear, you must consider renaming this dish, Maggie’s Delight.”

As a reward for his complement, he got his cheeks pinched – not entirely pleasant but he managed to smile up at her throughout the ordeal.

“Maggie, do you have time for two short questions?” he asked.

She looked around the mostly empty diner.

“I think I can probably squeeze that into my schedule. What’s on your mind?”

“The young woman who was sitting over there – is she a local person?”

“No. Started coming in regularly three times a day about three weeks ago. Never left her food untouched before, though. She keeps to herself. Always writing in a little yellow note pad. Not the type that lets you get friendly. I hear she’s writing a book.”

“You don’t know her name then?”

“Laura Bronson. She usually pays with a credit card.”

“Very good, Maggie.”

“Hey, this head is just old, it’s not dumb.”

“The second question, then,” Masters said moving on. “Does the fair city of Purdy Crossing happen to have a law enforcement officer?”

“A cop? Yeah, well sort of.”

“A sort of cop?”

Masters could hardly wait to hear that explained.

“We have one, part time, policeman – Willy

Rakes – the rest of the time he’s the TV repair guy and local photographer. Early thirties, too thin, already balding, dates Ellen Baker. Too nice a kid to be a cop if you ask me – no offense. His uncle’s been the mayor around here since Carter was president.”

That was, without a doubt, the most concise bio Masters had heard in his 50 years on the job.

“That was his shop we passed back at the end of the block, then?”

“That’s it. He’s been into everything electronic since he was just a kid. Just has started dabbling in cell phones. I told him it’s a waste of time – they’re just a fad like all the other fads that have come and gone.”

Hans lowered his head and swallowed repeatedly, hoping to smother his rapidly mounting urge to snicker at her clearly improbable observation. The bell that rang as patrons entered the front door momentarily distracted her and Hans drew a much-appreciated reprieve. It was a woman and two teenagers – presumably her children.

“A third quick question if I may,” Masters continued. “This family that just entered – What’s their name, again?”

“Baker. The mother’s Ellen. Jerry is her son and Brenda is her niece. They’re nice people.”

“Oh, yes, Bakers. Thank you.”

Maggie went to greet them.

“You know her – ah . . . them?” Hans asked in a whisper, leaning toward Masters and exhibiting a clearly urgent interest in the three.

“I do now,” the old detective smiled, smugly.

“You old Fox, you!” Hans said, obviously impressed.

“Hey! This head may be old, but it’s not dumb,” Masters replied, mimicking Maggie’s earlier remark, while repeatedly raising his eyebrows.

“She is certainly attractive,” Hans said, making no attempt to continue eating.

“Yes, for a mother of a teenager I’d say she is pretty well preserved,” Masters teased.

Hans just shook his head. Masters attempted to redeem himself.

“In my day, we’d have called her a knock-out – the

young lady that is.”

Jerry noticed Hans glancing in their direction and, assuming that it was he who was being looked at, stood and moved toward their table.

“Hi. I’m Jerry.” He raised his hands, shoulder high.

“I won’t bother you, but I just wanted to thank you for last night.”

“I was afraid I had embarrassed you. I didn’t mean to – I just say what comes to me,” Hans explained just the least bit defensively.

“Well, I have to admit I was embarrassed at the moment, but by the time I met up with my buddies, here, after the show, I suddenly had gained a rep as some kind of a stud. I’ll have to say that feels pretty good.”

“I can only imagine,” Hans said, smiling back.

Only he and Masters understood the sad and fully truthful implication of his words.

“You’re here with your family?” Hans continued, hoping for more than a polite exchange with another guy.

“My mom and cousin. They’d love to meet you – that is if you want to.”

Things were developing in an unbelievably friendly way, Hans thought.

“Well, I wouldn’t want to intrude on your privacy,” he said, taking a cue from Jerry’s earlier remark.

Masters privately interpreted the young man’s remark as, ‘Of course he would want to! He hoped to! And it seemed he was about to!’

Jerry leaned down close to Hans’ ear and, in a voice calculated to be just loud enough for Brenda to hear, said, “My cousin has the hots for you – like all the girls around her, I guess.”

It was Hans turn to blush. He looked for some cue from Masters who rolled his head in their direction and gave him a private, thumbs up as if to say, “Go get ‘em, tiger!!”

Hans blotted his lips with a napkin and followed

Jerry to the table. “Hans this is my mother, Mrs. Baker and my cousin.”

Hans nodded respectfully at Mrs. Baker but clearly focused his attention on the girl.

“Brenda, I believe,” Hans began.

Brenda nodded – no words available at that moment.

“I’m Hans Hanzik.”

“I know. I loved your pants – er – your performance last night.”

The suddenly reddening hues of their cheeks blended well together.

“Pull up a chair if you like,” Jerry suggested.

Hans glanced quickly back at Masters who nodded his encouragement. Hans moved his plate and juice to the other table and seated himself between Jerry and Brenda. From where Masters sat, it seemed the conversation was going well. He took out his pad and began jotting notes.

- See Willy Rakes about available police services.
- Contact NYPD about the deaths of Drs Watson and Carey
- Find a computer guy to research the E O F and Business Front, Inc.

Presently, Hans returned to the table. “Jerry and Brenda asked me to go with them to a baseball game this afternoon. I suppose that’s not a good idea, is it.”

“Where?”

“Up in Fayetteville at the University. About twenty-five miles North, I guess.”

“Well, if they’ll let this old codger trail along, I think it sounds like a fine idea.”

“Really! What about security?”

“Think with me on this one, Hans. Do you ever go to ball games? Do you ever go anywhere?”

“No. I’ve never even been to a ball game if you can believe that.”

“So, would any would-be assailant have made plans to attack you while you’re attending a game with friends, who, up to ten minutes ago, were total strangers to you?”

“Well, no, I guess not. How interesting.”

It's why I get the big money, Son."

The arrangements were made – pick up at the motel at one o'clock. Game from one thirty to three thirty, then back to Flint's place in time to relax, take an appropriate dose of Pepto-Bismol, and prepare for the evening performance.

Masters left a twenty-dollar bill on the table and moved toward the front door. Hans lingered behind. Masters cleared his throat. Hans said a reluctant goodbye. The door closed to the faint sound of a young ladies unbridled squeal.

The conversation on the walk home provided not one second for Masters to interject a single word. Perhaps that would not actually qualify as conversation then.

Just how it could take twenty-three minutes to recount a ten-minute conversation, amazed and puzzled Masters. Hans was in love. Masters – alone – realized that the boy's heart would eventually be broken, of course – but that's how it was with first loves. Until then, Hans was in love. It was a time to savor.

They stopped briefly at the house, where Masters picked up his briefcase and shed his sweater. With the coming of the sun, the temperature had quickly climbed from the very pleasant early morning low of 60 into the mid 70's. He checked the answering machine – no message from Evan. There was really no need for one, but Masters had to think if he were in the man's place, he would have called to see how his son's night away had gone.

Twenty minutes later they were in the motel lobby.

"I'd like to see the room you'll be using," Masters said.

"Sure. This way."

It turned out to be a small conference room. The table had been removed and its arrangement offered the air of a comfortable sitting room.

"How long are your private sessions?" Masters asked as he looked behind drapes and under chairs.

“Reading – we call them Readings,” Hans corrected. “We schedule one every thirty minutes, but I usually finish in fifteen or twenty.”

“And may I ask how much a Reading costs?”

“Sure. A hundred dollars. I know that sounds like a lot but it’s for such a good cause, you understand. I believe it’s tax deductible as a charitable contribution.”

Masters examined the phone.

“In the old days, you could unscrew the mouthpiece cover of these things,” he said. “Made a great place to plant bugs.”

“Bugs? Why would anybody want to bug this room?”

“Why would anybody want to harm you? At this point we have no answers, just questions, and solving a mystery always depends on finding the right question to ask.”

Hans swallowed hard.

“Until this minute I forgot about why you are here. I guess it really is serious business.”

“I have to assume so, Hans,” Masters said. “Have you received any of the threatening calls yourself?”

“No. I’m not allowed to answer the phone. Mr. Brown says it’s necessary to maintain the image – something about distance.”

“Do you know how many threats there have been – how many calls?”

“Not for sure. It’s nothing new, though.”

“Oh, I had assumed otherwise.”

“It’s been going on for at least two years.”

“My, My! That long. And you always receive protection of some kind at every stop on your tour?”

“Not always. Usually just in the smaller towns. I think Mr. Brown believes we can’t depend on the small-town police to provide good protection unless we pay them something extra.”

“I see. I suppose I need to ask him about that. Where is he, by the way?”

“In his room, I imagine – 217. He has his business to run so he spends most of his time on the phone and doing email. Once the people begin coming for Readings he meets them and checks them out.”

“That must make for a lonely life for you.”

“It could be if I’d let it. I’ve been at this for almost five years. I’m pretty good at it by now. I have my school work and I love to read. Mr. Brown is always bringing me new books and CD’s. He’s the one who got me hooked on Mr. Flint’s books.”

“I see. You into TV?”

“I like Music TV and sports – Yankees, Colts and Bulls. I can’t get excited about hockey or wrestling. They both seem to exist just to legitimize violence. That’s just not for me, I guess. I like the re-runs of the Brady Bunch. They are sort of like the family I never had, I guess.”

“So how does this all work? Your clients just show up and knock at the door?”

Hans smiled.

“No. They check into the room right next door – it’s 215 in this motel. It’s the same arrangement everywhere. Mr. Brown meets them there, handles the financial side of things with them, and gives them the ground rules. Since the threats started, he says he’s begun using a portable metal detector. Then he escorts them to the Reading room where he introduces us and then leaves. I wear a signal device I can press if there is a problem. There never has been. Mr. Brown screens my people very closely. He keeps the nuts away from me, you could say. Everyone has to be at least 21. I’m very comfortable with the set up. Like I said, there’s never been a problem during a Reading. I’m sure I’d feel it if there was dangerous stuff in anybody’s mind.”

“Ground rules, you said?” Masters asked.

“No touching me after the handshake. No speaking except in response to my questions or comments. No cameras, cell phones, recorders or other electrical devices. When I say the reading is complete, they are expected to stand and leave the room without comment.”

“Seems pretty well organized.”

“Mr. Brown is a very thorough person.”

Masters flicked the second light switch. Spot lights came on focusing on the oversized chair Hans occupied during the Readings. Hans explained.

"The room lights stay off. Just the spots – the image, you know.

Masters nodded and put his hands on his waist and looked around one last time.

"Everything appears to be in good shape. I suppose you need to change clothes?"

"Yeah. I better get to it. I always wait 'til the last possible minute. I really don't like my outfits. They aren't designed for my comfort you know. My room's right across the hall - 212."

"Mind if I come along?"

"No. You're always welcome at my place, wherever that might be. I still have fifteen minutes."

Hans opened the door and motioned Masters in ahead of him. He then closed and locked it.

"So, you usually have your own room, do you?"

"Yes. Always. I'm pretty much on my own most of the time."

He donned his working clothes. This time it was all white – loose cotton pants and shirt with long, flowing sleeves and tight cuffs. The bare feet remained. Masters assumed that was his trademark of sorts.

"So what do you think?" Hans asked turning around, hands in the air.

"Dashing, I believe would be the proper word," Masters said.

"Really or are you just saying that?"

"Really. You are a handsome young man, Hans, and your outfits have clearly been designed to accentuate and complement that."

"Thanks. It's really hard for me know. I look in the mirror and I just see a guy staring back at me. I never seem to know if a guy is good looking or not. Now if it was a girl, I could tell you in a minute – make that a second."

"Five minutes according to my watch," Masters said.

"Yeah. I need to get settled in. Where will you be?"

"I think right here is the best spot. I'll leave the door ajar

so I can keep an eye on your room and the traffic in the hallway.”

Hans took a small black plastic device from his dresser.

“This is the receiver for my signal unit.”

He pressed the button on his unit and the receiver beeped.

“It won’t be needed but . . . well, you should have it anyway. Mr. Brown also has one, of course. I always give a trial press like this before the readings begin so he knows the signal is working. I’ll be finished at noon. I just stay in the other room so my concentration doesn’t scatter. That duffle bag is crammed with books if you’re into reading”

“I’ll be fine. You just take care of your work and I’ll see you at noon.”

Masters stood at the door and watched Hans into the other room. Then he had some snooping to do. As comfortable as he felt with the boy, he felt just that uncomfortable with the rest of the set up. A careful examination of the room and its contents suggested it was occupied by a pretty typical teenager – a collection of CD’s, a variety of complexion creams, shampoos and conditioners, a small weight set, and an aerobic exercise video, which, from the cover, Masters assumed featured a bevy of scantily clad young females

Continuing in the vein of a typical teenager, there were also far too many towels in the hamper and a stash of junk food between the bed and the wall. The only odd find was a large box of 2 X 3-inch plastic, skin-tone, stick-to-the-skin bandages. It appeared to Masters that about half of the 100 count was gone. A lot of bandages, especially for a sit at home, never get to go out and play sort of youngster.

His snooping over, he positioned a chair so the view of the mountains was visible out the window to his right and the door across the hall easily monitored to his left. He extracted a few books at random from the duffle bag. They were mostly mysteries and science

fiction with a few biographies of sports legends – Hank Aaron, Arnold Palmer, Muhammad Ali and an ancient – though excellent - paperback by Pat Boon – Twixt Twelve and Twenty.

He donned his recently rescued reading glasses and began looking in the phonebook. Willy Rakes, TV repair, photographer and computer consultant 555-2101. Masters dialed.

“Rakes TV repair and computer stuff, this is Willy.”

The voice was friendly and enthusiastic.

“Willy, my name is Raymond Masters and I’m really calling for you as the local police official.”

“I can do that.”

The young man cleared his throat and in an obvious attempt at humor, lowered his voice.

“Officer Rakes at your service, Mr. Masters.” Then reverting to his original register, “I heard you were staying down at Flint’s place and I must admit I hoped to meet you. What on Earth would you possibly need me for?”

“It’s both important and strictly confidential.”

“Confidentiality’s my middle name. What’s up?”

“Do you have a way to discretely find out about the European Orphan’s Foundation – the young psychic’s charity – and a business based out of New York City called Business Front, Inc?”

“Lots of ways, Sir. The official police route will take days but I can go on line and have their pedigrees for you in less than an hour, I imagine.”

“Great. If it’s on your off-duty time, be sure I receive your bill.”

“It’s on the clock. There’s so little to do around here in my official capacity that I have to dress up in my uniform and parade the streets Saturday nights just so the folks feel like they’re getting their money’s worth.”

“One other thing, then, Willy. There is a Laura Bronson – medium height, attractive, short brown hair, wire-rimmed glasses – who has been here in town for several weeks. She seems to spend lots of time at the diner. Can you see what you can find out about her, also?”

“Consider it done. She spends time at the bowling ally,

too. I know who you mean. She says she's a freelance writer doing research into the history of Purdy Crossing. She's interviewed a lot of folks around here as I understand it."

"You're way ahead of me, then."

"Very few attractive young ladies spend time here in Purdy Crossing without getting my attention – well, actually, very few attractive young ladies spend time here in Purdy Crossing period. I'm sure it's less good police work and more hormones, Sir. I'll check her out officially, though. Anything else?"

"That should suffice for now."

"What?"

"That's all I need at this time. Perhaps we can meet outside the church during the program this evening."

"I'll be there. A big case, is it?"

"Well, actually it's no case at all at this point. I just feel the need to check up on a few things. I've been engaged to look after Hans Hanzik, the young psychic, while he's here."

"I'll get right on these things, Sir. See you this evening then."

"Oh, and one more thing. If you should need to phone me, please understand that my end of the conversation may be a bit cryptic. I don't want to upset the boy."

"Don't worry, Sir. Codes are my hobby. Have been since Billy West and I rigged up a telegraph between our bedroom windows when we were in 4th grade. I had the Morse Code memorized long before the multiplication tables."

"I never did get seven times nine, myself," Masters said.

Willy laughed. Masters hung up and dialed a second number from memory, eleven digits in all.

"Ray Masters, here. Is detective Reynolds available, please."

A few moments of silence ensued – well, almost silence. There was more than a little static on the line.

It reminded Masters of the old days when making a long-distance call was just expected to be a static-filled ordeal. With one more click his old friend answered – “Detective Reynolds, N.Y.P.D.”

“Detective Masters, R.A.L.I.”

“Ray. You son of a gun. R.A.L.I.?”

“Retired And Loving It!”

“Ray, you’ll never retire. We’ve all know that for years. What’s up?”

“I need a favor.”

“Favors are still piled deep in your favor. Anything, my friend.”

“Two accidental deaths I’d like some information about.”

“Oh. Oh! Sounds like two accidents are about to be reopened as homicides.”

“I really don’t know, Jim, but I’m in a situation where it is very important to know for certain – a young man’s future may be at stake.”

“Let’s hear the details.”

“Dr. Watson – I guess I have no first name – a psychiatrist died in a subway accident about four years ago.”

“Believe it or not, I remember that one – kind of. Let’s see . . . Barnard, Barnard Watson was his name. He was a famous psychologist, I think. Two or Three a.m. from a deserted subway platform. No alcohol or drugs in his system. No history of depression or financial problems according to his widow. Looked like a freak accident. I wondered at the time if it might have been some crazy patient but nothing warranted more than a cursory once over. The body was pretty well mangled as you can imagine.”

“Yes. I can imagine. How about running a check of his bank deposits? He had been seeing a young patient named Hans Hanzik. His guardian’s name is Evan Brown. I’m looking for some large deposit that his widow can’t explain or any threats she might know about that occurred at that time.”

“I’ll see what I can find out. You said there were two?”

“The other one’s out of your jurisdiction but he was a NYC resident – Dr. Carey, and again no first name – a surgeon who specialized in restoring hearing – perhaps a

neurosurgeon – I’m not sure. He operated on the same youngster. The doctor died in a private boating accident off Florida at about the same time as Watson – shortly after, I guess. It just seems to really put a stretch on coincidence – them both being the lad’s doctors.”

“I can see that. Probably a Coast Guard matter. It should be easy to trace. Those guys do everything in septuplet – if that’s a word. They still have the sardine cans thrown overboard the night that Key dude wrote the Star Spangled Banner.”

“And here I thought they were all selected because they just looked so darn good in those spiffy uniforms.”

“Spiffy? You’re dating yourself.”

Masters chuckled, acknowledging to himself the truth of that observation.

“Anything else, then, Ray?”

“That’ll do it. Call me at 479-555-6701. I probably won’t be there but leave a message. It’s Gary Flint’s place in case the machine sounds unfamiliar.”

“You’re in the Ozarks, then?”

“I’m retired. It’s summer. Where else would I be, you poor working stiff?”

“Haven’t seen Flint since you left the area. How’s he doing?”

“Actually, he’s in New York on business. I haven’t seen him. He still makes a scrumptious strawberry pie, I can tell you that much.”

“Have a piece for me, then.”

“It’ll be a chore, but anything for you. Thanks for your help. Good hearing your voice again and Jim . . . this one is very special to me.”

Masters relaxed back into the chair. He took out his pad and made a few notes. He gazed out the window at the light blue, cloudless, summer sky. Part of him wanted to prove Evan to be the scoundrel he felt he was. Most of him, however, hoped that all he would find was a loving father still working through his own, long standing, intimacy problems.

Masters had kept a close watch on the traffic in the hall and counted the number of times Evan had walked by the open door with clients. He never once so much as looked inside Hans' room on his return trips – always busy on his cell phone, looking at his ever-present clipboard. Apparently, something was considerably more important than making small talk with Masters.

'If I were the suspicious type, which I am,' Masters thought to himself, 'I might wonder if Evan had reason to want to keep me occupied or distracted rather than allowing me to roam free so I could snoop into something.'

That all changed at 11:55. Hans returned to the room, soon followed by Evan.

"Well, how are you two getting on?" Evan asked most pleasantly.

"We're getting on just fine, Sir," Hans answered.

Masters agreed.

"You have a wonderful son, here. He's welcome at my place anytime."

Hans beamed. Evan forged ahead with no acknowledgment of the compliment.

"You have things under control then, Mr. Masters?"

"There seems to be no reason to think otherwise."

"Good. Good!"

He turned to Hans.

"How did the Reading go?"

"Very well. Smooth in fact. Things moved right along. They all seemed quite appreciative."

"Good. Good! Well, I'll let you two get on with things then. Hans needs to be at the church by 6:30. I'll have his outfit ready for him there. Room service is on my tab, of course."

He turned back to Hans.

"Remember that tonight it will be black pants and crimson platform, okay?"

"Yes, Sir. I figured."

It didn't appear to Masters that the boy really had a choice though it seemed a nice gesture on Evan's part to ask.

"Well, Raysir, how did your morning go?" Hans asked, beginning to shed his outfit in favor of jeans and a T-shirt. He

displayed no modesty about the process which gave Masters the opportunity to casually inspect the boy for areas that might need, or might recently have needed the bandages he had found in the bathroom. No such wounds or abrasions were seen. Masters was not ready to inquire directly.

“My morning went well, thanks. I got some phone calls out of the way, made some notes to myself and looked over your reading material. You seem to be missing Flint’s last book, *The Case of the Gypsy Curse*.”

“Oh, no Sir, that’s under my pillow. I’ve been re-reading it. I really like to read about the boy and his girlfriend in that one. It’s like a primer for me.”

He raised the pillow as if to prove his point.

“I see the book is in pretty good company there,” Masters said, kidding the young man.

“The magazines? Yeah. I’d say pretty good company – Well, pretty company, at least. You know how that is.”

“Well, at least I think I remember how it was.”

“So, room service?” Hans asked.

“No! No! No! No! No! My boy! My boy! One NEVER eats before going out to the old ball park. Much of the baseball experience revolves around cramming your stomach with ridiculously large portions of hot dogs, burgers, nachos and an endless supply of pop and sno-cones. If you don’t leave the game with heartburn or worse, you’ve just not really been there.”

Hans grinned.

“I didn’t know. It sounds so great! Do you think they’ll like me when they’ve had time to really get to know me?”

“They, meaning Brenda?”

“Well, yeah, mostly I guess,” he grinned, “but Jerry seemed like a really nice kid. I’d like to be his friend, too.”

“You just be yourself and everything will be fine.”

“I’m afraid they’ll think I’m an awful dork – never having been to a game before.”

“And is that something you are required to divulge, up-front?”

“I suppose not, come to think of it. Maybe I won’t know what to do, though, and it’ll just be obvious.”

“You sit. You eat. You make small talk. You scream obnoxiously when the ump makes a call against your team however clearly correct it may be. What’s to know?”

Hans grinned the grin of all grins.

“I’m not much of a screamer but I can do all the rest of that I think”

Then in a more serious tone – “I haven’t told Mr. Brown about any of this. I feel uneasy about that.”

“Hey. Mr. Brown entrusted you into my care. If he has a problem with our activities, it is I and not you who have to answer for it. Loosen up! Enjoy! The way I see it you have a lot of make-up work to cram into these next few days.”

“Make-up work?”

“Fifteen and a half years of fun, Hans. F – U – N, fun.”

Hans sighed deeply and a tear ran down his cheek.

“Boy, I really don’t know how to thank you for all this.”

“There is only one way.”

“What’s that?”

“F – U – N! G o h a v e f u n!”

“Well, if you insist, Raysir, I’ll give it my best shot. Should I try and hold hands with her?”

Masters chuckled and shook his head.

“What?” Hans asked, smiling at Masters’ reaction.

“I had just forgotten how single minded 15 year old boys were.”

“G – I – R – L – S, you mean?”

“G – I – R – L – S, I mean!!!”

Hans became philosophical.

“I suppose girls become less important when a guy can be with them all the time.”

“And if you believe that, my boy, there is this nice little bridge in Brooklyn I’d like to sell you.”

“Not so, huh?”

“ ‘Fraid not.”

“Well that’s okay I guess because I really do like, liking girls. But what about holding hands?”

“If she wants to hold hands she’ll find a way to let you know. If it seems the thing to do, just go with it”

“This is complicated stuff,” Hans said all quite seriously. “I don’t know the rules, you know.”

Masters understood the seriousness of his quandary. “Well, I don’t know if the advice my father gave me is still in vogue, but it’s the best I have to offer, Son. ‘If you want the girl to think you are a gentleman who really cares about her, confine your hands to places at or above her shoulders or to her hands and lower arms, and always stop whatever you are doing the moment you feel it is making her uncomfortable.’”

“What about kissing?”

“Well, I know that these days, young people kiss often and all quite openly. However, I’d suggest going with the old show biz saying, ‘At the end of the first act, be sure you have left ‘em wanting more’.”

“That’s pretty much what I thought. I’m like you, I guess. I think kissing should be a private thing between two people.”

Masters didn’t realize that was what he had said, but it certainly was what he was thinking.

“It must be your psychic powers,” Masters said out loud.

“What?”

“Forget it. Just a little private joke between Masters and Raysir.”

Hans shrugged, shook his head and grinned.

“Well, thanks for the talk. I feel better about it, now.”

“Then, how about if we slip out to the restaurant down stairs for something to drink. We can wait for the Bakers there,” Masters suggested.

“Sounds good. I’m always thirsty after Readings. I talk so much.” Then, out of the blue he said, “Money! I’ll need money. I never need money. I always just sign for things or use my credit card.”

“I’ll tell you what, Son, I’ll advance you twenty real American dollars against your allowance.”

“What does that mean?”

“I have no idea. Just take the money and shut up”

It kept them chuckling all the way down stairs.

“My breath. I need to get some breath mints or something,” Hans said insistently, as he all quite unceremoniously sniffed at first one armpit and then the other.

“Have a box on me,” Masters said, taking a small container from his pocket. And just for your information, they don’t freshen armpits.”

Hans smiled, broadly at the absurdity of the idea.

“Thank you, Raysir. It really is too bad you never married. You’d have made one terrific Father.”

It was Masters’ turn for a single tear to trail down his chubby, old, cheek.

The hostess greeted them at the door to the dining room. Hans took charge.

“Two for drinks and don’t spare the carbonation!”

She rolled her eyes, turned, and showed them to a corner table.

“Boy, I don’t think I’ve ever been this excited or nervous or whatever it is about anything before,” Hans said as if that hadn’t been patently obviously or the past fifteen minutes.

His enthusiasm was cut short.

“There she is again, Raysir. The Laura lady from the diner.”

“And, she’s leaving again,” Masters added. “Seems she doesn’t want to be around us. Suppose we should be offended?” he added, trying to defuse Hans’ emotional reaction to spotting her.

“Me. Not wanting to be around me, I imagine. What do you suppose that’s all about? Should we tell Mr. Brown?”

“Let’s just keep it between us for now. No need to give Evan anything else to be concerned about. One of my calls this morning was in regard to her – to see what else we might be able to learn about her.”

“Real detective work, I guess.”

“I guess.”

“This is so strange. It’s like I’m really a part of a Raymond Masters Mystery Novel! What a hoot!”

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CHAPTER THREE

Day Two: Afternoon and Evening

It was Jerry who located them in the dining room.

“You didn’t eat, did you?!” were his first words.

Hans looked over at Masters as he replied.

“Just pop. We’re holding out for hot dogs and nachos and other gut-wrenching goodies.”

Jerry nodded, almost seriously, as if Hans had given the only appropriate answer.

“The women are outside in the minivan. I know we’re a little early but Brenda was driving us nuts ‘til we left. I’ve never seen her this eager to get to a ball game.”

It was his way of indicating her interest in Hans. Masters played the spoiler. “Well, I could tell she was interested in me at the diner this morning. I’ll just have to let her down easy.”

Hans shook his head and rolled his eyes at Jerry who wasn’t sure how to react.

“Mr. Masters is a hoot, Jerry, but you have to get used to his . . . what shall I call it . . . his off-the-wall style.”

Masters assumed a smug expression.

“Hear that, Jerry. I have style.”

Masters was given the front seat. Brenda sat between the boys in the back. Jerry seemed to be the conversationalist of the group and had comments to make about virtually everything. Ellen drove – mostly quietly. Masters enjoyed the scenery – the beautiful hills and valleys. Hans, too, enjoyed similar scenery – the beautiful Brenda.

The home team was favored to win so allegiances were

easily established. There's nothing like rooting for the sure thing. It was a good afternoon. They ate. They talked. They ate. They laughed. They ate. They became fast friends. Perhaps the most wonder-filed discovery of the day was that Hans could scream!

Ellen and Masters got to know each other. She was somewhat reserved, clearly intelligent and fully dedicated to the well-being and upright raising of her son, Jerry.

For Hans and Brenda, there had been hand holding and time spent studying each other's' faces. On the way home there was even an arm around her shoulder. Hans and Masters were dropped at Flint's place. One of those almost kisses took place – close but no cigar, Hans.

As they entered the house, Hans couldn't find enough words to thank Masters. Then it happened! In the entry way, he stopped short in his tracks. He put his hands up shoulder high – palms front.

"Excuse me, Raysir. I am definitely going to be sick."

Masters chuckled – not maliciously, but there was definitely some degree of pleasure in realizing that Hans' first experience at the old ball park had come to its inevitable and proper culmination.

Masters checked his messages. There was just one, short and to point, from his detective friend in NYC.

"Our new forensic pathologist reviewed the autopsy report on Watson. Dead before he hit the tracks – neck snapped – case has been reopened. I imagine that's not good news for you. Later."

Masters erased the message. It was not good news. Hans returned and Masters managed a smile.

"Boy was I sick. I've never done that before. It was Great!"

"Great?"

Masters was confused by the boy's take on it all.

"A ball game, a new friend, three hours and twelve minutes with a beautiful girl right there beside

me, and ball-park sick. It may be the best day of my life.”

Masters shook his head and smiled – this time it was genuine.

“What?” Hans asked.

“You are a delight, young man!”

“I don’t understand.”

“I know you don’t. Just let it be.”

Hans shrugged, indicating he was okay with that.

“Not quite two hours before my performance. What shall we do?”

“I for one was considering a short nap,” Masters said.

“I’ll shower while you nap. I feel nasty – the smoke and sweating, you know.”

“You go decontaminate yourself, then. I’ll catch forty winks.

Hans bounded up the stairs and Masters marveled at the lad’s energy. He positioned the recliner for a rest, closed his eyes and the phone rang.”

After a brief discussion with himself about just letting it pick up, he disengaged himself from the chair and went to the phone.

“Masters here.”

“Rakes here. Can you talk?”

“Yes. What’s up, Willy?”

“Something that I thought you needed to know right away. Laura Bronson has a room at the Mountain Crest Motel a few miles south of where Mr. Brown and Hans are staying. And get this – she has an adjoining room with Chris Blau – a known felon. He makes his way applying muscle for hire. An east coast, big city resident mostly. Free-lances, as far as I can find out. He wears a leather patch over his left eye. His rap sheet just suddenly stops about five years ago – seems to have kept his nose clean since then.”

“Or he went to work for somebody smart enough to keep it clean for him.”

“That’s a possibility. One more thing. He was a sharpshooter and hand to hand specialist in the infantry before he was tossed out as an incorrigible.”

“You do good work, Willy Rakes. Anything on Laura?”

“From New York City. Worked as a lady of the evening

– high class and very expensive – until five years ago, when she seemed to disappear without a trace. I got the idea she has lots of stories she could write about rich old men, but probably nothing as plain-Jane as a history of Purdy Crossing.”

“Thanks for your call. We’re still on for this evening, right.”

“Yes, Sir. I’ll try to have more by then.”

Masters returned to his chair but the nap had suddenly become unimportant. Mr. Dirty Work and Miss Street Walker, sharing a suite just down the road from Evan’s motel. The pair could certainly be working for whomever was making the threats. But why would Laura have needed to be there for so long before Evan and Hans arrived? Perhaps she was the brains – the planner of the attacks - and Chris the one who carried them out. It made no immediate sense that they would be in Brown’s employ. Hans seemed to be the center of the man’s life, for whatever reason. Brown went on the road for the Foundation which seemed to cause considerable inconvenience for him when it came to running his primary business. Since he had never made the threats public, they could not serve any publicity angle. Masters hoped Willy would be able to trace both Laura and Chris to some other common source.

A possibility popped into his mind. He returned to the phone.

“Jim. This is only a hunch but if that boat wreckage is still available, have a forensics guy examine the fuel tank. I suspect that it is what exploded. If that’s right, then the ruptures should all be bent outward. Have him look for a single, dime-sized rupture going in.”

“And would you care to direct this investigator to a specific location on the tank,” Jim asked, half chiding his old friend and yet half serious.”

Masters proceeded in all earnestness.

“It will be on the side closest to the hull and I’d say pretty much dead center. And, oh yes, when they

locate that hole have them check its edges for traces of foreign metals and such – lead, silver, titanium, phosphorus.”

“Shall I just write the report now, or do we need to actually go through with the examination?”

“You’re wasting precious time, James. By the way there is a local policeman working with me here – Willy Rakes. He’ll use the usual code if he calls you on my behalf.”

Masters hung up and quickly dialed another number, looking over his shoulder to make sure Hans did not appear unexpectedly.

“Willy. Masters, here. One more thing if you have time. Hans made several predictions last night – the watch and the billfold were found. Can you find out about the others?”

“I’m on it. Maggie’ll know. She knows everything that goes on around here. She just lets my uncle think he’s the mayor.”

“Another thing and I may run out of time, here. Can you arrange to secretly take a close-up photograph of Mr. Brown – one that will be suitable to fax or email for police ID?”

“Sure. I can get it tonight at the show. This is getting pretty heavy, isn’t it, Sir?”

“Unfortunately, I’m afraid it may be. Something else just hit me, Willy. They don’t allow recorders into the show but do you have some way of recording it from outside - a parabolic set up of some kind?”

“Very good Mr. M. Yeah. I have exactly what you’re talking about. I can set it up on the second floor of the feed store – right across the street from the church. My uncle owns it.”

“The Mayor?”

“No. Another Uncle. My dad had seven brothers. We’ve considered petitioning to have the town’s name changed to Rakes Crossing.”

Willy’s carrying-on amused Masters but time was precious.

“I’ll let you get on it then. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate your assistance.”

“Believe me, Mr. M. the pleasure is mine. I haven’t had so much fun since fifth grade when Mary Lou Caudill let me ... oh, well, that’s best lost in the shadows of history.”

Masters looked skyward, momentarily muttering something like,

“Thank you, Universe, for at long last providing me with a cop who isn’t one French fry shy short of a Happy Meal.”

Hans returned as Masters was hanging up.

“I didn’t hear the phone ring,” he said.

“Oh, I was thinking of ordering pizza but then decided I’d wait to ask you” – not entirely a fabrication. Masters was always thinking about food.

“How can you even think of eating?”

“I suppose that would be better after the program.”

“I may never eat again!” Hans said, smiling as if it were some wonderful occurrence.

“Somehow, I doubt that, young man.”

Hans reclined on the couch and Masters returned to his chair.

“Feel better all cleaned up?”

“Oh, yeah! I felt like my entire body was coated with smoke. My hair still smells but I spritzed it with cologne. Nobody’ll get close enough tonight to be able to tell. I hate having to do my hair.”

“Yes, you mentioned that. Fill me in on your tour. Where have you been the past six months?”

Hans willingly reeled off a long list of wide spots in the road.

“No cities?”

“Not for a long time – several years at least.”

“But Los Angeles is next, if I recall.”

“Not really. I’m not sure why Mr. Brown said it that way. Maybe he misunderstood. We’re working our way west across Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico and Arizona before we get to the Los Angeles area. I never know the specific stops ahead of time – I could, I’m sure, but one place is just like the next to me – two motel rooms, an auditorium and room service. I’m sure he meant small towns in the area of Los Angeles.”

Masters moved on.

“You seem to be feeling better.”

“Oh, yes. I’m fine. Just not hungry . . . She let me hold her hand at the game and put my arm around her in the car.”

“I noticed. Nice?”

“Nice?? It was Wonderful, Fantastic, Awesome! I felt like a little Jr. High school kid on his first date, though. I guess in most ways I was, huh?”

“Seemed to me you managed everything like an old pro.”

“Really? Wow! Thanks. I wanted to kiss her at the car, outside, but with everybody around, I couldn’t for some reason. I’d have probably missed her mouth anyway. I’ve practiced the nose thing with a silly putty nose stuck to a paper plate. I think I got that part down okay.”

“Nine days left for kissing. I’ll try to arrange some private time for you some way.”

Hans kicked his legs into the air.

“I can’t believe all this. I expect to wake up and find I’ve fallen asleep in front of the aerobics tape.”

“You can actually sleep while that tape’s playing?”

Hans just smiled. Masters thought it wise to change the subject.

“Chess?”

“Sure. I’ve only ever played on my computerized game board but I’m pretty good up to level four.”

“How many levels are there?” Masters asked.

“Four.” Hans laughed out loud.

“Ouch!” Masters replied. “Well, I never play for money so all I have to lose is my pride.”

A chess table was set up and waiting by the window at the rear of the great room. Hans made easy work of Masters in the first game. The second had lingered on for forty-five minutes by the time the clock struck six.

“Well, you need to be there by 6:30.” Masters said. I need to change. That’ll just give us time to get you there.”

Masters came back down stairs, bedecked in his trademark, dark, three-piece suit, and was suddenly transformed from “Raysir” the matchmaker, back into Raymond Masters, revered detective.

“Looking sharp, Mr. Masters, Sir. Want half a peanut butter sandwich. I decided I was a little hungry after all.”

“No thanks. I’ve been re-enjoying my nachos for the past two hours. Bring it along. You can eat on the way.”

They talked as they walked.

“You feel comfortable on stage, barefoot and stripped to the waist?”

“The modesty thing, you mean? Sure. No problem about that. During the five-years I spent at the orphanage, I was lucky if I had anything to wear at all. Anyway, like I said, I like how I look. I guess I’m sort of an exhibitionist. If I can’t be with girls at least I can leave an impression on them. I shouldn’t talk that way. My programs are serious business – I really do take them seriously.”

“I know you do,” Masters said, trying to reassure the boy. “It sounds to me like you’ve just described the inherently compulsory thinking of a very normal adolescent male.”

Hans smiled and leaped into the air for no apparent reason. In fact, he seemed entirely oblivious to what he had just done, further supporting Master’s previous statement.

Masters escorted Hans into the church through a rear door and on to his dressing room. Evan arrived at virtually the same moment and Masters left them alone, taking a seat on a bench in the hallway across from the door.

The Minister came by and introduced himself. “John Williams - Mr. Masters isn’t it”

“Yes. How do you do? It is a grand old edifice, isn’t it?” Masters commented, looking around.

“Spared by both the North and South during the war between the states. Of course, it’s been repeatedly added onto since then. Is there something I can do for you?”

Masters suddenly realized that his presence there in the back hall must seem odd.

“Oh, No, Sir. I’m a friend of Hans and Mr. Brown. I’m just here with them.”

“That Hans is certainly a gifted youngster,” the

minister went on, shaking his head repeatedly. Masters remained quiet hoping for more, which was soon forthcoming.

“He predicted a donation from a long ago resident and at noon today, there it was in the mail.”

He took an bulky envelope from his inside pocket.

“Five thousand dollars. Can you imagine that?”

He pointed to the return address and showed Masters.

“Pearl Willis. The old-timers remember her. Apparently moved away when she was a teenager some fifty years ago. The note just says: ‘To the church that meant so much to me as I was growing up’. Can you believe that?”

He returned the envelope to his pocket and looked at his watch. Well, I should be getting out front I guess. Nice to meet you.”

Masters had noted the name and return address but waited to jot it down until after Rev. Williams was gone.

At 6:58 the dressing room door opened and Hans and Evan emerged. It was no longer the teenager in love or the boy yelling pointed suggestions at the umpire. It was without any doubt a more distant, focused, professional, Hans Hanzik, Clairvoyant extraordinaire.

“Have a good program,” Masters said. “I’ll be right here to meet you afterwards.”

Hans nodded, all quite seriously and followed Evan toward the stage. Masters waited in the wings until Hans was seated on the flaming red satin platform. He decided that he, personally, liked the red outfit on the black background better, though had no idea why. He then exited through a side door and made his way around to the front.

Willy had not yet arrived. Masters surveyed the second-floor window across the street. He saw the small, dish-like, listening device and detected movement behind it which he assumed was Willy making sure his set-up was working properly. Then all grew quiet. A few minutes later, Willy strode across the street. Masters was some concerned about how his helper would get the picture of Evan since, by then, the introduction had surely been completed.

“Everything okay?” Masters asked.

“AOK, Sir.”

He handed Masters a large brown envelope. I had the

chance to get these earlier.”

It was a set of two, 8 ½ by 11 color photographs of Evan – full face and profile.”

“They’re on my digital camera so I can email them anywhere in a flash – so to speak.”

“You do good work, my friend. Not the usual slapdash surveillance picture quality.”

Masters removed his note pad and tore out a page drawing a line across it and jotting a phone number below it.

“The phone number is for Jim Reynolds, a Police Detective friend on the NYPD. Call him. Say I said to ask about Mildred – his wife. It’s a code to let him know you’re legit. Get his email address – I don’t have it. Tell him what you’re sending. Ask him to see if Mr. Brown is known to anyone there by ANY name.

“Okay. I love this!”

“The recording is going okay, you say?”

“Like a charm. What’s the next step with that by the way?”

“I haven’t the foggiest idea,” Masters replied to a clearly confused Officer Rakes.

“Data,” Masters tried to explain. “We’re collecting data. You never know what will be helpful and what will be rubbish.”

“I see. Data. Okay then. I’ll see that you get the ‘data’ as soon as the program is over.”

“That’s great. By the way, nice uniform.”

“Thanks. Warm weather issue – for winter I add a jean jacket and long-Johns. We’re on a short budget around here. I better get back upstairs.”

Masters entered the community room and stood in the darkness at the rear. Hans held forth for another seventy-five minutes – a bit longer than the previous night. More intimate details and several more very specific predictions were made – largely small scale and of the lost objects variety.

At the conclusion, Hans received a standing ovation through which he sat quietly, smiling but not really acknowledging it. The curtains were drawn slowly

and smoothly and the program was over. Again, the hall was abuzz with astonished exchanges.

At the rear of the room were tables with cards to be filled out by those wanting private Readings. They were slipped into a slotted box. Masters counted 100 plus deposits. Another \$10,000 for the E O F he calculated. And, another fifty hours of work for Hans.

Masters went to join the boy and Evan back in the dressing room. Brown spoke.

“Hans leaves in our limo. The crowd expects that.”

He had donned a light, scarlet cape and matching slippers. Brown didn't miss a trick when it came to making a grand impression.

“Probably best if you meet us at your place if you don't mind. There is always a little showmanship necessary – for the cause, you understand,” he explained as if that were for some reason necessary.

“I understand,” Masters said smiling – and he did. He just wasn't sure what cause Evan was referring to. “I'll be right along. Go inside and make yourselves at home. Hans knows the alarm code. I'd rather he wasn't left alone.”

“Certainly. He and I need time to talk anyway. Haven't seen much of each other today.”

Evan and Hans exchanged what appeared to be fond smiles. They left through a rear door, clearly 'leaked' as the point of exit Hans would be taking. The predicted crowd was waiting - clapping as Hans quietly entered the automobile without ever looking into the assemblage. As the limo began its theatrically unhurried exodus, Masters began his trek back down the hill.

Half way home he was approached by a speeding car and had to move quickly into the grass to avoid being hit. A hundred yards further on Masters spied the limo in the ditch. He hurried (well, you understand!) down to the scene of the accident.

Hans, Evan and the driver were all standing off the road, behind the vehicle. None appeared to have been hurt. Evan explained.

“A car was waiting just down there near the curve. When it saw us coming, it turned on its lights and headed full

speed directly at us. Our driver wisely steered us into the ditch.”

“You’re all alright, then?”

“Yes. There doesn’t seem to be any damage to the car either, thanks to the driver’s quick thinking.”

Brown turned to the driver.

“Can you back it out?”

“I believe I can. Stand away and let me try.”

Once the car was on the road, the three of them rode together on down to the house.

Evan turned to Hans as they pulled to a stop.

“Will you be okay, son?”

Hans smiled.

“Sure. I’m sorry about it all. I just didn’t receive a feeling. I couldn’t warn you. I’m fine, though.”

“Nothing to worry about, then. I’ll leave you in Mr. Masters’ capable hands.”

There was no hug, no kiss – not even a handshake or pat on the back. It broke Masters’ big heart. Something was just not right.

“We need to report this to the police,” Masters said.

“I suppose so,” Evan agreed. “Can you take care of that for us? I imagine you know just how to do such things.”

“Certainly.” Masters addressed the driver.

“You have a card? I’m sure the police will need your statement.”

The card was procured and the limo dove away, leaving Masters and Hans in the front yard.

“Better get you inside and into some real clothes. It’s turned pretty chilly tonight,” Masters said putting his big arm around the boy’s waist.

As he opened the front door, Willy pulled up in the town’s only squad car – ten years old and trailing purple smoke. Masters wondered how Willy could have learned about the accident so soon.

“Evening guys,” he said, nonchalantly, as he got out of the car and positioned his hat. “Excuse the vapor trail. She’s on her last legs.”

“News travels fast in these parts,” Masters began.

“News?” What news is that, Sir?” Willy asked.

“You didn’t hear about the near accident, then?”

“Accident? No, I just come out to deliver . . . to deliver . . . my congratulation to Hans on a remarkable performance this evening.”

“Thank you, but I really have virtually nothing to do with it. I just show up and the Universe tends to the rest.”

Willy had brought the tape and almost spilled the beans. Hans knew he had changed the message in mid-stream but let it go figuring it was something private between the other two.

“What about the accident?”

“Hans, you can describe it for him. I wasn’t there,” Masters suggested.

“A car had stopped at the east end of the curve, just up there.” He pointed. “It was facing up hill. When we approached it from up above it turned on its lights and seemed to head straight for us. It forced us into the ditch. I didn’t really sense any danger. Strangely, I didn’t sense anything at all.”

“Intentional you think?”

“It certainly appeared that way. However, it makes little sense.”

“How come?”

“Well, at that spot the most it could do was force us off the road unless it had intended to crash into us – not likely, I’d imagine – it could hardly have missed if that’s what it had set out to do. 100 yards further west up the hill and it could have forced us over the cliff and into that raven. It just doesn’t add up if its driver was really trying to do us any harm.”

“Bravo, young detective,” Masters said, patting the boy on his back. Hans smiled and looked Masters in the face, brow slightly furrowed.

“You took the questions right out of my mouth.”

“Really? Probably right out of your mind, then.”

“I have the idea this time they came straight from your own gray matter. Don’t undersell yourself in the smarts department.”

“Can you describe the car?” Willy asked, his pad suddenly in hand.

“Not exactly.” He closed his eyes as he talked. “Probably dark colored. Double head lights in front with the fog lights on – they were centered maybe two feet apart just above the bumper. An antenna – bent back at a slight angle – on the rear right fender. Probably a big engine as it accelerated very rapidly and it was coming up the hill from a dead stop. Maybe a chrome strip running along the bottom of the doors. A four door. No hood ornament. Sorry, that’s all I remember.”

“No sorry about it. That’s a big help,” Willy said. “Most guys couldn’t do that well in broad daylight.”

Hans shrugged and grinned.

“We were on our way into the warm recesses of the house, I believe,” he continued, looking up at Masters and exaggerating a toes-to-head shiver.

“The boy must be freezing out her,” Masters said more to Willy than Hans. “Is that enough for now, Officer?”

“Oh sure. I’ll get on it. Hans proceeded inside. Willy handed the tape to Master. “I haven’t listened to it yet,” he whispered.

“Thanks, again,” Masters said, turning and entering the house. He locked the door behind him. Inside, Hans was nowhere to be seen. Upstairs, Masters assumed. He put the tape into the drawer of an end table. He’d get to it after Hans went to bed.

While he waited for the boy to reappear, Masters put on some hot chocolate and munched on a few marshmallows as he stirred with a long, hand-carved, wooden spoon – one he had bought for Flint years before from the spoon-lady at the Farmer’s Market on the square in Fayetteville.

Presently, Hans was back, looking much more like a real boy in jeans and a red and white University of Arkansas sweat shirt.

“Hey, this from you, Raysir?” He asked tugging at the shirt. “I found it on my bed.”

“I thought you needed at least one genuine memento from the Ozarks. Hope a medium isn’t too large.”

“Just roomy enough. Thanks a lot. This is really great!”
He sniffed the air. “Cocoa?” I love Cocoa!”

They sat and drank and talked. Two unlikely friends – the premier young psychic on the continent and the revered, old, ever-skeptical, Detective Masters.

Hans was soon off to bed. The following day he had Readings from eight until noon and one to five. He was conscientious about getting enough sleep.

Masters put the cassette tape into a player intending to listen to it.

“Confounded new contraptions,” was his initial response as he found he was unable to read the tiny labels under the long row of buttons.

He fumbled for and donned his glasses and soon had the machine operating. He noticed a smudge on the left lens of the glasses as he removed them. While he breathed on the glass to moisten the lens in preparation for cleaning, he reached into his back pocket for his handkerchief. Holding the glasses up to the light he discovered it was not just a smudge but rather a fingerprint. That in itself was not unreasonable but this was not your run-of-the-mill, late night, glasses cleaner – it was Detective Masters. He breathed on it a second time to make the print reappear. Clearly it was not his. Who else had handled those glasses? No one. No one since he had removed them from the hamper. It appeared to be a thumb and far too large to have been from Hans’ small hand.

As he had suspected, someone other than he had placed them in the shirt pocket. Other aspects of the ‘case’, such as it was, began to fall into place.

He took the glasses to the kitchen, dusted the lens with powdered sugar, blew off the excess, and captured the resulting print with cellophane tape.

“Beautiful job, as usual, Masters,” he said to himself out loud. “Or, perhaps, I should say ‘sweet job’ – no, probably not.”

He cleaned the glasses under the faucet. He would put the print into Willy’s hands the next morning. In the meantime, he returned to the tape player. He had nothing in mind as he listened. For all of Willy’s high tech equipment, it was not a very good recording. Blasts of static nearly

obscured much of the sound. Masters had to wonder if there might be a large electric transformer nearby or a high voltage power line. He opted for the power line theory because the static was similar to what he had picked up on the phone at the motel.

All in all, it was a disappointment. He took the tape with him to his room for safe keeping. It had been an interesting day – F-U-N even. Perhaps it was all just the run-away imagination of a bored, old detective who had never really learned how to just relax on vacation. He hoped it was. He believed it was not.

CHAPTER FOUR

Day three: Morning

Six thirty the next morning found Masters and Hans again entering the diner. Hans had been invited to meet his new friends for breakfast. Masters had arranged for Willy to drop by.

Jerry and Brenda were just sitting down and Hans went to join them. Masters went on back to his usual table. One of the men got up and followed him.

"I know the rules are that I can't speak to the boy," he began, "but I hope you can pass on to him how much I appreciate the time he spent with me. I called my daughter and it was just like he said, she was willing to talk to me. It's been 25 years. I'm going out to Pennsylvania to be with her next month. It's the best thousand dollars I've ever spent, I'll tell you that. Just tell him thanks, if you can do that, Sir."

"I'm sure he will be pleased," Masters said. "I'll see that he gets your message."

So, Masters thought. Not \$100 but \$1,000 for a reading. He took out his note pad and reviewed the boy's schedule for the week. He would have a minimum of 80 reading that week - \$80,000 for somebody. If, as Hans suggested, Evan only claimed \$100 a session, there was an extra \$72,000 a week going somewhere. The E O F books needed some scrutiny. If those figures held up, Hans was producing over four million dollars a year. Masters had to wonder – though only briefly – if Hans was a part of a scam. 'If he is, I doubt if he knows it', Masters thought, wanting to convince himself that was, in fact, true.

A second man approached him, taking a seat across the table and speaking in hushed tones.

"I don't know what your connection is to the psychic kid, but if you have any influence I'd sure like a reading from him. I filled out a card but got a call saying I was on standby. I'd only get one if somebody else dropped out. I'd pay him double that thousand if it would help. My name is Bill Harmon, by the way."

"I'm not affiliated with the tour, Sir, so I really don't have any influence on such things. The boy and I are just friends. You might say I'm a companion for him while he's here."

"Well, I thought I'd give it a try. Sorry for bothering you."

"No problem."

Suddenly, Masters had a fully unsolicited verification of the dollar amount per Reading. It was possible that there were just too many folks wanting Readings but at a thousand bucks a shot, Masters had to wonder how many folks in little Purdy Crossing could afford it. A waiting list seemed unlikely.

Willy arrived and played his role well, making it appear it was an accidental encounter. In the end that wouldn't have been necessary since Hans was so involved with his new friends that he didn't take notice. Willy sat down next to Masters.

"I got stuff," he began. "The return address on the envelope from the church donation is non-existent. No one by that name lives anywhere in that place. It's a town of under 4,000 people. One interesting thing – There is a mail forwarding service operating out of that zip code."

"How long have you been at this police thing?" Masters asked.

"Eleven years now, Sir." His brow furrowed wondering if he had missed something important.

"Well, you're a real pro. I'm impressed – thinking of the mail forwarding possibility."

"I'm probably just snoopier by nature than I am a good cop."

“Either way, it’s good work.”

Willy smiled appreciatively.

“I took the initiative to follow up on the two others, as well – considering what I found out about Pearl.”

“The two others? I assume you mean the contest winner and the poetry book.”

“Right. I got to wondering about them after I discovered that Pearl was a ghost – so to speak. Anyway, they both came through to the tune of \$2,000 apiece – sort of strange all by itself they would be the same amount. I got the return addresses on both of them. The contest cashier’s check was drawn on a bank in Cloverdale, Indiana – a tiny town. There’s no contest business there as far as I can find out. I spoke to the night cop there last evening – a three cop town. We had a lot in common. When I described my situation, he said that he suddenly felt quite cosmopolitan.”

“And the poetry publisher?” Masters asked.

“Poetry, Inc. according to the letterhead and envelope - out of LaSalle, Illinois. There is a publisher there – kids’ books and magazines mostly - but no Poetry, Inc. known to anybody I spoke with.”

“And,” Masters said, twirling his hand for the bottom line.

“And, as you’ve guessed, I suppose, there is a mail forwarding service there. I hope I wasn’t to forward about all this, Sir. I’m sure the local folks here have no idea what I was up to.”

“You have done good police work, Willy. I can mark two items off my list.”

“I got more,” Willy went on, becoming more and more hyper with each revelation.

“You must have stayed up all night.”

“Pretty much. This is SO great, though! I probably couldn’t have slept anyway – me and Raymond Masters working a case together. It gives me the chills!”

Masters never knew how to accept such complements, so he went for humor.

“I know what you mean. It simply gives me the ‘Willies’.”

Willy groaned – Masters took it as a sign of

appreciation, then he spoke again.

“More, you said?”

“E O F and Business Front, Inc. They are both legitimate – well, legal, anyway. Inc is a New Mexico corporation and E O F is a not-for-profit corporation out the Cayman Islands – that might be a red flag, I figured.”

“Scarlet, Willy. Scarlet flag! I do have one marker I can call in down there – an Inspector Carmen with the national police. I’ll take care of that. Anything else on Brown’s company?”

“Yeah, but I can’t see how it can help. Inc grossed about three million dollars last years and after a variety of right-offs, paid taxes on one point eight mil. Sounds pretty legit.”

“See if you can find some clients of Business Front and contact them. Use any excuse – a fellow from Inc.’s Customer Services Department or something – see what you can learn about the services they supply, level of satisfaction, even fees if you can figure a way.”

“Now it’s international. This thing just gets better and better,” Willy said.

“Or, worse and worse depending on where you’re sitting,” Masters said, glancing over at Hans.

“Oh, well, yes, Sir. I understand that. Believe me, I do.”

“Willy, tell me something. Do you believe in psychic powers?”

“Me? Well, I guess I really didn’t ‘til the kid showed up here. I don’t know.”

Let me phrase it another way. Say you did believe. Would you expect a clairvoyant to be 100 percent accurate? Say he made” . . . Masters scratched some figures on a napkin . . . “100 predictions a week. Would you expect all 100 to be exactly on the money?”

“Wouldn’t seem reasonable, I guess.”

“That’s my take, too.”

He shook his head, and then went on.

“Have you found out anything more on the European Orphan’s Foundation?”

“Well, like I said, they seem legit – or at least legal. They have an office in Prague that seems to be where the money is allocated from.”

“Prague. Prague. Who do I know in Prague – there must be somebody. I’ll have to think.”

“Did you have a chance to listen to the tape?” Willy asked.

“Just the first few minutes of it. Lots of static or interference of some kind. Is that a general problem around here? I had the same experience on the phone at the motel.”

“Static?” No, Sir, not to my knowledge. Sometimes when a sheriff’s car is transmitting it will overflow onto the higher TV bands of nearby sets, but that’s voice, not static. If your room at the motel is close to the power transformer that might interfere. I’m not sure about that though. The older neon signs are bad about producing static – play havoc with both AM and FM radios if it’s close by. The motel does have several huge neon signs.”

“Willy, is there any topic on which you’re not an expert?”

“Not an expert, Sir. I just know a little bit about a whole lot of things. Always been fascinated by how things worked. I’d take out books from the library on interesting topics and poop out after the first couple of chapters. More dangerous than knowledgeable, probably.”

“Well, it sure seems to be paying off for us this week.”

Willy beamed, taking proud notice of the word, ‘us’. Nervously, he brushed back the nonexistent hair that once graced his high forehead. He stood and strode – perhaps swaggered - out of the diner.

Masters finished his breakfast – Maggie had just brought it to him – on assumption - without receiving his actual order. Hans joined him, taking a seat across the table.

“Jerry asked me if I’d like to spend the night at his place. I told him that probably wouldn’t be possible, but I thought I’d ask anyway. He’s a great kid. I really like him.”

“Well, you’re right. I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to stay there. I know you wouldn’t want to put him and his

mother in possible danger. But, you can certainly invite him to stay with us.”

“Really?” I hadn’t thought of that. Thanks!”

As he got up, Masters added, “That’s just Jerry - not Jerry and Brenda.”

Hans smiled. “Nothing coed, huh.”

Masters just shook his head and waved the boy away. He had to wonder, though, wouldn’t a clairvoyant have some inkling about that answer? Maybe not since Masters would have had no reason to be thinking about it prior to having said it.

They were running late so there was no stop at the house. Hans had many things to relate about his time with his new friends.

“Last night I laid awake and worried about what being with Brenda and Jerry might do to my image – and therefore my ability to be helpful around here. This morning I talked with them about it. They agreed – their suggestion, really – that they wouldn’t talk about me to anybody. I feel a lot better now. I was really worried about what Mr. Brown would think – how he would react to all this.”

“Masters thought that was a strange phrase to add. “Does he react badly sometimes?”

“I’ve heard him raging at people on the phone – never when he knew I was close enough to hear. He’s never that way with me, if that’s what you’re getting at and I sense that it is.”

“Do I need to be getting at something?”

“No. Well, I guess I should just say it. I receive the impression that you don’t like Mr. Brown.”

“Well, I really haven’t spent enough time with him to make that kind of a decision.”

“Maybe, ‘like’ is the wrong word – ‘trust’ – I feel you don’t trust him.”

“What I think about Evan Brown has no relevance for you. You and he seem to have a relationship that satisfies you both. I’m happy you have a special person like that in your life.”

“I really do love him and I know he loves me,

even if he only ever came right out and said it that one time in the hospital.”

It pained Masters to hear that, but he smiled and picked up the pace.

“This seems like a very full day for you, Hans. Readings from eight to noon and then again from one to four. Doesn’t that wear you out?”

“Not really. When I’m doing Readings, it’s like I’m there but I’m not there. The time passes amazingly fast – the four hours this morning will seem more like one.”

“I have my evenings free unless Mr. Brown receives too many applications for me to handle during the days.”

“It may be none of my business but do you get some kind of an allowance or salary?”

Hans smiled.

“I get everything I need and most of what I want. Like I told you I sign for things at the motels and hotels and pay for Chinese and pizza with my credit card. We aren’t doing this for ourselves, you understand. I have so much more than the orphans that I feel really guilty every time I think about it.”

“I suppose there are several orphanages that receive funds from your Foundation.”

“Four, I think. Mr. Brown takes care of that – actually, I guess it’s Mrs. Palzik in Prague – that’s our local distribution center in Europe.”

“And I imagine the place where you lived receives some of that.”

“It’s at the top of the list,” he responded enthusiastically. “So far we’ve added running water, hot water for baths, regular milk delivery, beds and mattresses so every kid has his own, soap, a full furnace, blankets and money for food. Every kid gets a new set of clothes when he arrives and again on every birthday. I want to change that to every three months as soon as we can. At Christmas Mr. Brown and I send toys out of our 3%. Some Christmas I want to take the toys to them in person.”

“I forget if you said where that was.”

“A huge old, four story farm house and barn outside of Travnik. The Pruski Farm, it’s called. I don’t remember telling you, by the way.”

“I guess you’re right.”

They arrived at the Motel with only fifteen minutes to spare. Hans changed clothes and went right to the reading room. They would meet for lunch.

Master’s chair was still in place. He adjusted the door and prepared to make some calls. The first was to Jim at the NYPD.

“I told you the Coast Guard was a bunch of pack rats. They re-examined the fuel tank – actually it was the first really careful inspection. The accident scene was scattered with contraband rifles and ammo so they assumed gun running and that something accidental happened to set it off – case closed. Anyway, back to the findings. You are slipping in your old age, Ray – off by 2 ½ inches horizontal and 1 ¾ vertical. There was a bullet hole – some kind of an incendiary according to the mineral traces. They will have something more specific for us this afternoon. On the other case, Dr. Watson had \$25,000 deposited into his account on the day he first saw the Hanzik kid – a wire transfer from a company called, Overseas Connection. It no longer seems to exist. Was apparently based in London. English records are a nightmare to wade through but it looks like it was owned by someone named – or calling himself – Elliot Bronson. Appears to have been a short lived import-export company.

“I suppose you caught it, too,” Masters said.

“The E. B. – Elliott Bronson – Evan Brown. I caught it. We have Watson’s former accountant checking out his records for any solid, actual, business connection that would have resulted in such a payment. One more thing. There was an unusual entry in Watson’s appointment book for nine p.m. on the night of his death.”

“Unusual?”

“Just the initials C. A. B. Maybe an abbreviation for something else. No active patients at that time with those initials –not even any just plain C. B’s.”

“Do you suppose a killer would make an appointment under his own name,” Master said, mostly

thinking out loud.

“We’ve seen it before.”

“I know. Still, it never ceases to amaze me. Any former or inactive patients?”

“Still plowing through them. He was sixty and had been in practice for over thirty years. It may be tomorrow afternoon before that’s finished, but back to Carey. One suspicious thing – maybe. The Hanzik boy’s surgery cost Brown \$250,000. It looks like similar procedures by Carey were going for only \$100,000 each at the time. Notes on the boy’s hospital chart show one visit by a Mark Mann, Ph. D. I haven’t been able to track him down yet. This might be helpful though. His chart entry appears to say – you know doctors and their writing – ‘Device functioning perfectly – beyond my greatest expectations. Should have functional a life of at least twenty and perhaps fifty years.’

“I have a suggestion for finding him,” Masters said.

“What’s that?”

“Search the obituaries during the months immediately after that entry.”

“Oh, my! You don’t think . . . well, I guess you do think. Okay, I’ll get Records on it. You suppose their murders are all on Brown’s plate?”

“I hope not, Jimmy, but that hope just keeps fading. Thanks, and I’ll talk with you later on. By the way, do we have a contact in Bosnia? At the embassy, maybe – armed forces?”

“Let me check. I’m sure in this day and age I can dig up somebody – no pun intended there.”

It was a full blown, Masters-sized sigh that accompanied the hang up. He needed to collect his thoughts and summarize what he knew – and what he didn’t know.

Evan seemed to be a legitimate business man who was, as he purported, also wealthy. Watson received a substantial payment coincidental with Hans’ treatment and from a company that might have belonged to Evan – that connection needed to be explored. Evan was charging ten times more for Readings than Hans believed was the case. Clearly the boy had not stopped to figure that 3% of his earnings could not possibly pay his expenses. At sixteen

reading a day, he would bring in \$1600 at \$100 each. 3% of that would be about \$50. Three motel rooms, food, transportation, auditorium rental – it didn't add up. Either Hans was the greatest actor Masters had yet met or the lad just trusted Evan so much that he had never felt the need to make the computations.

Although it was a long shot that the C. A. B. in Watson's records could refer to the one-eyed, Chris Blau, if that were the case, it would tie Laura into all of this somehow. If Chris did Evan's dirty work for him – Watson and Carey – then Laura was also tied to Evan. Her role was becoming clear to Masters – more so once he learned some applicants for Readings were being turned down.

He needed two pieces of information in a hurry - the Ph. D's specialty and who owned the finger print from his glasses.

He placed a call to Willy.

"Anything on that fingerprint yet?"

"Just in – a fax was waiting for me when I got to the shop this morning. You'll love this."

"Just tell me it belongs to Chris Blau so I can get on with my day."

Why, Yes, Sir. It is Chris Blau's. You had that figured all along, did you?"

"I'm afraid I have most everything figured, Willy. Well, except for one very important aspect. I'll get back to you."

Later in the morning he placed another call.

"Jim. Ray here. Anything on the Ph. D. yet?"

"Yes and no."

"No time for games, James."

"Well, we found he's been missing since about six weeks after he visited Hans in the hospital."

"Missing?"

"Not a trace. He told a fellow researcher he was going on vacation to Florida. He was single. Can't scare up any relatives – he was English, by the way. One more thing, the lab he ran - some kind of neuro-psycho-techno research lab – seems to mostly implant

chips and such into monkeys for research actually being conducted in other labs. Anyway, it received a \$100,000 grant from our illusive friend Elliott Bronson's defunct business in England. Seems a solid tie between this Bronson guy and two of the doctors involved.

"Now we really need the Elliot-Evan connection."

"So far that one's a blank. I did find a contact in Bosnia – Colonel Geoffrey Hook – he's in Civilian Relations – whatever the heck that is. He's the husband of the granddaughter of the Captain down at the 32nd. Want me to follow up on something with him?"

"If you would. I feel I'm really imposing, though."

"Sure you are – 2,000 miles away and you're about to solve two NYC murders we didn't even know had taken place as well as one missing person case for me – lots of imposition here, Masters."

"Do I detect a sarcastic tone, there?"

"Probably, basted with envy, but it comes from love."

Masters chuckled his expansive tummy into wave after wave of gelatin-like ripples.

"Okay, then, I need to verify that the Pruski Farm outside of Travnik – it's an orphanage – had Hans Hanzik as a resident for four or five years beginning about ten years ago."

"Their records are non-existent you know."

"I know. I'm counting on the same woman to still be running it – an older English woman. She and Hans seemed to have been pretty close."

"I'll get right on it. I have the Colonel's cell phone number. That's some change from the old days, isn't it, Ray. In thirty seconds, I'll be speaking to a soldier half a World away."

"I know and I still can't get a cassette player to work. Let me know as soon as you know anything, please. And, as long as I'm so indispensable to you, let me press my advantage one more time. I really need to know the entire nature of the surgery done on Hans."

"That may take some doing."

"Why's that? You got the data from his chart in such a hurry?"

"It seems the boy's surgery records are missing at the

hospital. We'll try Dr. Carey's private files but if it wasn't on the up and up, he probably didn't put anything in writing. I'll check the Ph. D's records, too. In my experience those lab guys keep every last detail – always looking to publish a paper.”

“Later then,” Masters said and hung up.

Unrelated to the conversation, Masters noticed that the static on the phone seemed to come and go. More than that, it seemed to come when Hans' clients were with him and go when they left. Masters nodded thoughtfully and drummed the arm of his chair. Perhaps Evan was recording the sessions from next door or, more likely, was somehow jamming the area so no one could sneak a listen from afar.

He made another call.

“Willy, my main man. Can you drop up here and see me at the motel. I have something I need you to look into and by the time you arrive I'll have some sketches put together that will help explain it.”

“Give me twenty minutes.”

“Fine – room 212. Come up the back stairs. I don't want Brown to see you, okay?”

Masters went to the desk, found some stationery and began sketching. By the time Willy appeared, Masters had his theory outlined in detail. Actually, it was two different possibilities. He went over the ideas with the young policeman and a plan was formulated. Willy left with the notes in hand.

Masters' thoughts turned to his new young friend. There was still a chance that Masters' theory was wrong. It all hinged on evidence that was not yet available.

At that moment, not Hans, not Evan, not the E O F or Inc. had been found to have done anything wrong. Hans made his predictions. Evan, even if charging more than he told Hans, was still legitimately collecting funds for orphans and the E O F was a legal entity that presumably passed national audits for not-for-profit associations and, at least according to Hans, used its money very wisely for the benefit of the homeless

children. Evan paid a large sum each year in income taxes.

But that was all how it appeared on the surface. Any scam, to be successful, first had to appear legitimate on the surface and then had to be able to maintain that condition for the length of the operation – and beyond. Masters kept coming back to Hans' unbelievable success rate – 100%, day after day, town after town, year after year. It just seemed well beyond the realm of possibility to Masters.

The fact that it had clearly been Chris Blau who had hidden Masters' glasses in the exact place Hans predicted they would be, called all of Hans' predictions into doubt – well, maybe. The benefit of the accurate, free predictions was clear – quickly develop a band of ardent believers who would shell out large amounts of money to learn more about themselves and their own futures. If it were, somehow, a scam, one fact was clear – it called for the accumulation of a huge amount of personal information in a relatively short amount of time and the skillful pilfering of personal items at the last minute to be stashed in the spots later predicted to be their resting places. Just because they had been stolen and stashed did not necessarily rule out that Hans – if he had a 'gift' – could have actually located them clairvoyantly. It was the uncanny accuracy that called the process into doubt for Masters.

At noon Hans changed clothes, and the two went down to the Restaurant for lunch – Evan was unavailable. The conversation was pretty much one-sided and not at all what Masters had anticipated.

"I think I better call off having Jerry come over tonight," Hans began.

Masters answered with only a furrowed brow. Hans explained:

"When I was in the Orphanage I never got candy – in fact if I'd had ever had any before, I didn't remember about it so it was like I didn't know it existed. Since I didn't know it existed, I didn't miss it – I didn't want it. I just kept my mind on the things I knew about. I wasn't dissatisfied because I didn't have candy.

"Well, this friend thing is like that candy. Before I had friends, I didn't miss them. I didn't want to be with friends because I really didn't know about them. I could put my whole

life into my work. Now that I'm getting these friends, I really do want them. For the first time, I can ever remember, this morning I wished I could be with them instead of having to go to work – and I love my work – it's important. So, you see, I think it's best if I just pull away here and go back to how it's been.”

“You've been doing some pretty deep thinking, it seems,” Masters said, buying time to formulate a response.

“I slept very little last night, Sir.”

Masters noted the retreat to 'Sir' but made no mention of it.

“I was going to tell them at breakfast this morning but my desire to be with them kept me from doing what I should have done. And then I just let myself get in deeper and deeper with this Jerry staying over thing. It was like I couldn't disappoint him because he was my friend. It's hard to explain. I can see that friendship is really complicated and requires responsibilities I've never had before.”

Masters was ready.

“Let me try to explain some things. All normal people have things they want to do and things they must do. I want to fish, walk in the woods, paint, go to plays and concerts, spend evenings with congenial ladies, read, and dozens of other things. I also must do my work and I have been doing it pretty well for close to 50 years, now. Just because I have lots of things I want to do, doesn't mean that I am still not able to do well those things I must do. It's called, having your priorities in order. It seems to me, that these past five years you've had just one priority – your work. Now, you are growing as a person – growing rapidly. You have several things that are important to you – work and now friends.”

“And girls,” Hans added, fully seriously about the addition.”

“And girls, right. So, when, this morning you were thinking how nice it would be to spend the day with Jerry and Brenda, did you just give in and skip

work?”

“Of course, not.”

“Right. Of course, not. And why was that?”

“Priorities?” It was a question.

“A good and firm sense of priorities. Rather than reacting to the fact that you now have some new choices by abandoning your friends because they are a distraction, you just need to put your friends in their proper place. Tell yourself what I’ve been telling myself or seventy years, “I work first, then I play.” Anticipate with fondness the times when being with your friends will be appropriate, and then roll up your sleeves and get to work. Do what you must do, first, but don’t deny yourself what you want to do later.”

Hans shook his head, slowly and repeatedly.

“You don’t see the logic in my point,” Masters asked, feeling at a loss as to what other illustration he could offer.

“Oh, no. It’s not that it at all. I was just thinking that five minutes ago I had a problem that was the biggest problem I’d ever had to face – a total, life changing, life saddening problem but now – 300 seconds later – it doesn’t even exist anymore. How did you get to be wise, Raysir?”

“Patience and a long life. Wisdom happens in its own time.”

“I am starved!”

With those words, Hans seemed to have signaled that the conversation was over. Masters was relieved. It was a short-lived reprieve, however. Hans talked non-stop through his burger, fries, shake, pop, and peach pie.

“I know you don’t trust Evan. It started me thinking, especially about our expenses.”

‘Oh, Oh,’ Masters said to himself. Hans continued.

“We bring in about \$1,500, maybe \$1,800 a day. Three percent – our expense factor – of that is about fifty or sixty dollars. What do motel rooms run?”

“Probably about \$75 each, on an average,” Masters said.

So, that’s \$225 a day for the three rooms. I figure we spend another \$75 on food a day – that’s \$300. Then there is the limo service, clothes, and transportation from town to town. I wouldn’t doubt if we actually spend close to \$400 a

day on the average. That's ten times the 3% Mr. Brown says he takes for our expenses."

Masters heart began to sink, as Hans logically built a case toward same conclusion he had reached. The young man continued.

"I think that has to disprove your mistrust of Mr. Brown."

It was not the conclusion Masters thought Hans was leading up to.

"And just how is that?" Masters asked, fully confused, but trying not to show it.

Hans looked surprised. It seemed so clear to him.

"Mr. Brown is really paying our expenses out of his own pocket – out of his own heart, really – so all the money we raise can go to the kids."

With the base of information Hans had to work with and his deep affection and loyalty to Evan, his conclusion was fully logical.

Masters had been caught completely off guard. He grasped for a response.

"Well, if all that's so, I will certainly have to agree with you."

Hans really only heard, ". . . I certainly have to agree with you."

The youngster felt good about the conversation and was ready to take care of his afternoon obligations – four more hours of Readings.

Masters figured he came through lunch only batting 500 – well, 666 actually, because the peach pie had been delicious!!

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CHAPTER FIVE

Day Three: Afternoon and Evening

The afternoon had provided no new information for Masters. Hans would be finished at five. Masters had used his time to make a few special arrangements for the early evening.

At 4:55 Hans entered the room all smiles.

“Well, I’ve completed my ‘musts’ for the day and I’m ready for my ‘wants’ of the evening.”

He began changing into his “grubbies” as he had earlier referred to them.

“I’m going to suggest that you wear clean jeans and shirt this evening,” Masters said.

“For Jerry? He’s a guy!”

“Jerry has been delayed until 7:30.”

Hans was visibly disappointed. Masters hurried on.

“But, I’ve managed to run in a substitute.”

Disappointment slipped into confusion with interest.

“Just get dressed. There is a limo downstairs with a young lady waiting in it. There are reservations – of sorts – at Tiny Tim’s Pizza in Fayetteville. I’ve arranged for them to make you the most fantastic Pizza you’ve ever experienced. I’m afraid I’ll have to tag along but I’ll ride shotgun up with the driver. The window and curtain will provide more than enough privacy for anything a young gentleman like yourself will be doing with a young lady, whom he respects.”

Hans was beside himself.

“Your father’s talk, you mean.”

Masters smiled. The message had landed.

The ride took thirty minutes each way. The dining, at a secluded table for two, overlooking the beautifully flowered terrace, took another sixty. There was quiet talking. There was hand holding and arms around their waists and shoulders. There were long, tender looks into each other’s faces. There were fingers through hair and touching of faces. And, yes, (for those of you who are far too interested in the young man’s romantic life) on the ride home there was kissing – lots of kissing. All in all, Mr. Masters’ father would have been proud of Hans – well, mostly.

The limo stopped to drop Brenda at her home. Hans walked her to the door, and then floated back to the car. A block east, they picked up Jerry and were soon back at the house.

Inside, Hans directed Jerry and his duffle bag up to his room saying, “First room on the left. I’ll be right along. Use the closet if you got hanging stuff.”

He then turned to Masters and, with no hesitation or warning, administered an all-out bear hug.

“You are the best friend I will ever have, Ray. Thank you.”

Masters returned the unexpected embrace not knowing what to say. Nothing was necessary. Hans released himself, turned, and charged up the stairs after Jerry. From the thumps on the ceiling and boisterous giggling, Masters assumed there had been a flying tackle followed by prolonged tussling. How nice! How very, very nice!

The doorbell rang. It was Willy.

“If this is a bad time I’ll come back.”

“No. Come in. Hans and Jerry Baker are upstairs – he’s staying the night – provided the timbers of this old house don’t come tumbling down first.”

The boys punctuated the statement at just the right time. Willy ducked. They both smiled.

“Pretty nice thing to do. That’s a nice family,” Willy said. “Ellen lost her husband in a hunting accident when Jerry was a baby. It’s been a terrible financial struggle for her. She

does interior design. She's very good at it. Just not much call for it here in Purdy Crossing."

"Sounds like you know her pretty well."

"Not as well as I'd like to, you could say. We've gone out - off and on - forever it seems. She's gun shy I think. Trouble letting herself get close to another man. We're good friends. I wish it was a lot more but I'm a patient man."

"You have something for me?" Masters asked as he motioned Willy toward the sofa.

They took seats.

"Several somethings, actually. I was talking to Wes Thompson - he had a Reading done this morning. Real excited about it. But, more interesting - get this - Laura Bronson interviewed him two weeks ago, for her book. He said she seemed pretty interested in him and his wife and figured he'd probably be quoted in the book. As he talked about it I got the idea she was actually pumping him for some very personal information. Family stuff, where his kids lived, what they did for a living - strange things for a history book I thought. Also, she seemed to be interested in things about his friends - less well known things - personal secrets - from way back. I guess she's a real charmer. Everybody seems to like her. Now, get this, she's been spending the nights at my uncle's place. He's old and widowed and wealthy and vulnerable to a young lady's - how shall I say this - charms. He knows everybody and everything about everybody who's ever lived in these parts. Stays in, mostly, these days. I doubt if he even knows the psychic kid is in town."

"Your conclusion is . . . ?" Masters asked.

"She's the front man - well, more accurately, I guess, she's a woman with a great front - working for the clairvoyant kid. She finds out stuff he can use and feeds it to him."

"One problem with that theory - and I'm not dismissing it as possibly being true, understand - is that I've been with the boy day and night. He has not heard from her. In fact, he has not heard from anyone

including Evan Brown. He's a brilliant kid, no doubt about that, but I doubt if he could memorize such a huge amount of person-specific information in such a short time."

"I see. So, you think he's legit?"

"Let me put it this way. I'm convinced that Hans believes he's legit. That's where my theory falls apart. Some years ago, there was a TV evangelist who wore an FM receiver in his ear – so small and clear that it was undetectable. His wife, or somebody, would work the crowd before the service and take notes, then during the service she'd feed him information through the receiver. He put on some pretty spectacular shows. Some guy in the audience with an ear-plug, FM receiver, trying to listen to the ball game over his wife's protests, happened onto the transmission and blew the whistle on the whole operation."

"You think that's the scam here?"

"I can't believe it is in this case. If it is a scam – and I must admit I think it is – I think that somehow it is being done without the boy's knowledge or willing cooperation."

"The trance may have a part in it?" Willy asked, more than suggested as he searched for any possibility.

"Hans describes it more as a mind clearing state than a trance. He seems to remain quite aware of what's going on around him. During his Readings, he has a device on his person to signal for help if anything should get out of hand. He remains fully aware of things, I'm sure. He knows when people come and leave and what time it is and when he's finished for the morning or afternoon."

"So, it's back to the diagrams then. The radio scanner set to receive the FM frequencies that could be used in that kind of an operation. But it just sounded like you didn't believe that was how they pulled it off."

"We have to know, one way or the other."

"Yeah. I see that."

"And don't overlook possibility two, that the static really represents some kind of jamming operation."

"That seems more likely – in light of what you were just saying."

"I wish I knew," Masters answered. "Have you had a chance to think through the details?"

"Sure have. I'll need two directional scanners. Each should be within ten or fifteen yards of the receiver and one on each side of it so we can triangulate to find the source."

"How about for the first stage we just listen with one scanner to see if there is actually anything going on. If there is, then we can get more elaborate."

"Sure. That'll be a cinch. The fella who manages the motel is a friend of mine. I can get a room right where I need to be and he won't question it."

"Let's get it set up for tomorrow then. Hans has Readings from eight to noon and one to five."

"If there's some signal being used, we'll know within a few minutes," Willy assured. "I suppose this is one of those situations where not finding anything is as good as finding something. If it's not there, we know to look elsewhere."

"You're right, Willy. It's all data. You'll be able to record it and time and date stamp it in case you find something?"

"No problem."

"We got sidetracked. You said that you have several things."

"Yeah. The car Hans described that ran them off the road. One answering its description was reported missing from the parking lot of the Mountain Crest Motel last night. The call went to the sheriff's office since it's outside the city limits. The owner called them this morning to say it had been returned no worse for wear. He had no idea about the odometer Readings so there was no way to tell how far it had been driven. Bottom line is, he was in a hurry to get on his way so he asked to have the investigation dropped. It would have been futile anyway so I'm sure the Sheriff was happy to let it go."

"They didn't look for prints then?"

"Afraid not. We could put out an all points if you think we need to look it over. We have the plates."

"Most likely any prints are smudged beyond recognition by now, don't you imagine?"

“Probably. And, if it was a pro he’d have worn gloves. If we found any strays, they would probably just be those of some teenager who hot-wired it for a joy ride with his girl.”

Suddenly something else hit Willy.

“What about the surveillance cameras in the motel parking lot?” Willy asked.

“They have them?”

“I installed them myself – another sideline.”

Look into it, then. Good thinking, officer.”

“That’s it for now, I guess. Anything else I should be doing?”

“There is one thing. It may be unnecessary overkill in the data gathering area, but there have been several locals who were turned down for Readings. I’m betting they were either not interviewed by Laura or they didn’t have anything useful to reveal. Do you suppose you can snoop around on that?”

“Bet I can. Well, if that’s it, I better be off. Lots to do all of a sudden.”

He left.

The boys returned down stairs.

“Any munchies, here?” Hans asked.

“Lower counter, 2nd door left of the sink.”

“Hey, party time!” Jerry said as the door was opened.

“Anything?” Hans asked.

“It’s here just for you guys. Go at it.”

They were soon stumbling their way back upstairs juggling bags of chips, containers of dip, shirt pockets filled with candy bars and cans of pop stuffed under their belts.

“If that’s not enough, I’ll call and have them bring the IGA over,” Masters called after them, kidding. He marveled at how they ate so much and yet remained so slim. Of course, it had been a year or so since he’d run up and down long flights of stairs several dozen time a day.

He was pleased to see Hans learning about being a regular kid – and he seemed to have lucked into a good and willing teacher – model – whatever. At the same time, Masters was also terribly worried about the boy. If his hunches panned out, Hans was going to be devastated. Hans loved Evan Brown from the deepest recesses of his strong,

young, trusting, heart. To learn the relationship was a sham would crush him – unless of course, the lad was in on it all – a possibility that had to remain open.

Something else had been gnawing at Masters – something Hans had said after the accident – something like, “I didn’t have any feelings about the danger.”

On the occasions of the previous accidents, Hans had feelings that forewarned him so he could protect himself. Why would the most recent accident be different? Perhaps it was simply an unplanned hit and run – maybe a teenager took the car for the evening as Willy had suggested and he and a girl had been parked along the side of the road. When the other car approached, the boy may have panicked and caused the accident through sheer carelessness. He hoped Willy’s surveillance cameras had picked up something useful.

“The phone rang. “Masters here.”

“This is Jim, Ray. Hoped I’d catch you still awake.”

“I have two fifteen-year-old boys with me here tonight. I’ll most likely be up ‘til the rooster crows. What’s up?”

“Good news and useful news.”

“Let’s have the useful first.”

Dr. Mann – the Ph. D. We found him, sort of. He was checked into the same hotel in Key West as Dr. Carey – on the same weekend and it was the weekend of the boating accident. He checked out within fifteen minutes of Carey. I can’t put them together – face to face – but it’s another one of those to good not to be true coincidences.”

“Fish food?” Masters asked, indelicately.

“That’s my feeling. Two sardines for the price of one, so to speak.”

“Okay, now the good news,” Masters urged.

“Your boy, Hanzik, did live in that orphanage for almost five years and a Mr. Brown did come and get him. They do receive supplies and some money from E

O F. All that seems to check out. Margaret McDuffy – the old gal who runs the place and, as it turns out is also a retired MD – says she gets a long letter from Hans the first week of every month, like clockwork. And, oh yes, she said he exhibited remarkable predictive impressions about people and their intentions from a very young age. There may still be more. I got cut off from Colonel Hook’s call.”

“Well, I suppose that is good news.”

“You don’t sound convinced.”

“Oh, Yes, I don’t doubt the truth in it. I just have to wonder why?”

“Why?”

“Why that orphanage – Why Hans – Why Mr. Brown. Why take a deaf kid? Why find and take the only English speaking kid in the area. Why take one who had brilliant parents?”

“Well, I don’t do whys, Ray. I just do dids.”

“Well, you’ve done the dids very well on this one. Thank you, Old Friend.”

He hung up and started for the kitchen. The phone rang again. It seemed as though his sweet tooth was not supposed to be satisfied that evening.

Masters sighed and answered, “Masters here.”

A hesitant, soft, female voice said, “This is Brenda Baker, Mr. Masters. I just wondered if I could speak with Hans. I was so dizzy about our wonderful time together that I really didn’t ever thank him for the best evening of my life.”

“Of course, you may speak with him, Sweetheart. Hold on, it may take me a minute to get his attention.”

He put the phone down, walked to the foot of the stairs and called, “Hans, a phone call for you.”

Hans appeared at the top of the stairs. He whispered – loudly enough to be heard in the basement – “I’m, not allowed to take calls.”

Masters attempted to imitate the boy’s whisper.

“This one is different. I’ll personally take full responsibility.”

Hans’ brow furrowed. Masters continued.

“You do know which end of the phone to talk into, don’t you?”

Hans smiled.

“Which phone?”

“How about the one in your room? Press the green button and pick it up. I’ll hang up down here.”

By the time Masters was back at the phone, he heard Hans’ excited voice coming from the receiver. He hung it up. At long last Masters made it to the kitchen and got on with the process of preparing some hot chocolate. Jerry appeared.

“Mind if I hang here ’til Hans is finished? I figured it was a private call when I heard him say Brenda’s name.”

“What a gentlemanly thing to do. Sure, please join me. Pull up a stool. I was about to brew up a cauldron of hot chocolate. Will you join me?”

“Sure. Sounds great! May I help?”

“I can handle it but thank you.”

“He sure is a nice kid. I really expected him to be a stuck up, spoiled brat, you know.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. He’s anything but that. Did you know he’d never kissed a girl before Brenda?”

“Yes. I believe he mentioned that to me.”

“I can’t believe it.”

“That he’s so inexperienced with girls?”

“No, that he’s so honest about it. I don’t know any other guy his age who would have admitted that. We all lie about our girl stuff – all the time – whether we need to or not – it’s just what we do. He has to be the most honest, trusting kid I’ve ever met.”

“He is honest and trusting,” Masters said, figuring ‘Jerry-the-mouth’ would have more beans to spill. He did.

“It’s too bad about that thing on his neck but I guess since it allows him hear it’s worth it.”

Masters was at a loss but said nothing. Jerry, of course, went on.

“I can understand now why he wears his hair so long. He let me examine the tiny solar cells. They are amazing. He says they are glued and stitched into

place and are wired right into the hearing stuff inside his head. It's like he's a bionic man or something. I didn't ask him if they hurt. Do you think they do, like when he twists his neck around and stuff? I can go easier when we wrestle around."

"I can honestly say that I have never heard him complain even once."

"I won't ever tell anybody about it, Sir. You can count on me that way. It's his own business, you know. I assume Brenda found them and he explained about it to her, too."

"Yes. I agree. It should be his own private matter."

"He is some special kind of guy. Losing both parents, the orphanage and all, and look at him now. Helping all those thousands of people and he's not even old enough to drive. I got my learner's permit. Mom usually lets me drive her places. She says I'm pretty good. I like driving with Willy better. He has a lot less suggestions, you know. Mom gets nervous when I use the blender so you can imagine how she is with me and the car."

"I can imagine."

The boy amused Masters.

"What's out in your future do you hope?"

The nature of the question momentarily puzzled Jerry but he soon recovered.

"College, marriage, family – I want to be the best father that ever lived. I never knew mine – don't know if you knew that."

"Willy mentioned it."

"Wiley's one cool dude. He likes my Mom a lot. I've been trying to get them hooked up since I was six. He's always been like my 'sort-a-dad', I guess you could say. Taught me how to fish, shoot a bow, track animals, swim – even gave me the birds and bees talk when I was too embarrassed to ask mom. I can't figure why Ma is so stubborn about it. I know she loves him."

"Sometimes widows feel a loyalty to their deceased husbands that's hard for the rest of us to understand," Masters said.

Jerry nodded.

"Loyalty. I hadn't thought about that but I can understand it. Back when I was ten or so I'd make up

fantasies about mom and Willy and me becoming a family. I thought a lot about what I would call him if that happened. I didn't know if it would be right to call him dad, you know. So, I suppose, in a way, I sort of understand, about the loyalty thing, I guess."

That had been the most tentative position statement Masters could remember ever hearing. He smiled to himself.

"You seem to be pretty close to your cousin, Brenda."

"Yeah, like best friends. We were born just ten days apart – she's older but I feel like her big brother. Her dad – my father's older brother – went bonkers after my dad was killed. He just up and left one day and hasn't been heard from since, so, me and her have always had lots in common, I guess. I'm pretty protective of her. I don't like her dating just anybody. Hans is cool though. He's okay. I've never met anybody like him. I thought I'd be freaked out being around him, you know."

"Oh?"

It proved to be way more of a response than was needed to keep Jerry talking!

"Yeah. I thought he'd read my mind and know all my bad thoughts and secrets. I haven't asked if that's how it works for him but for some reason now that I know him, that doesn't matter. He comes right out and tells me all his private stuff – like he doesn't want to have any secrets from me. It's weird and it's really great – really comfortable. Like best friends – brothers, maybe. I can't be sure how that would be."

"I'm happy you two have hit it off so well. I can tell you that Hans also feels very close to you. Interesting how that happens"

"What?"

"How sometimes we just seem to immediately click with someone else from the first time we meet."

"That's exactly how Hans says it was with him and you, Mr. Masters."

"I suppose that's true, come to think of it."

Hans descended the stairs two at a time.

“Cocoa!” he said, sniffing the air.

Masters felt playful. He turned to Jerry.

“The lad gets a good night call from the most beautiful girl in town and all he has to say to us is, ‘cocoa’?”

“You two really want all the intimate details?” Hans offered as he mounted a stool.

“No, thanks,” they answered together, pushing their palms in his direction.

So, they settled for hot chocolate – cocoa, to Hans – and a heated exchange of their theories about how marshmallows might be made. Masters was amazed and amused at how that innately mundane topic could produce roll on the floor, wet-faced, uncontrollable belly laughs from two, relatively sane teenagers.

It was both wonderful and exhausting to have young people around. Masters began to understand that saying about the main benefit of being grandparents.

“One reminder guys,” Masters noted at last. “It’s 10:30 and Hans has to be fresh and ready to face the world at five a.m. I assume you have sleeping in your schedule.”

Hans became momentarily serious.

“Yeah, nuts! Right!”

He addressed Jerry.

“I do have to get to sleep soon.”

“Well, then, get your butt upstairs, pal. I can’t tuck you beddy-bye down here.”

They raced up the stairs. Raucous yelping seemed to have become an intrinsic part of their process of moving from floor to floor.

Masters heard quiet, muffled conversation until eleven, then all went silent.

“Two really good kids,” he said out loud.

He took a new yellow pad from his briefcase, poured the last of the cold, hot chocolate into his mug, and sat down at the kitchen table. It was time to outline all the possible scenarios.

Scenario Number One: That the several coincidences were just that – coincidences.

Three doctors who had worked with Hans were all killed

or disappeared shortly after treating the boy.

Of the “extra” and still unexplained deposits to these doctors at or around that time, two were from Evan but one from Overseas Connection – a company owned by Elliot Bronson and apparently engaged in some kind of international commerce.

Brown’s and Bronson’s initials were the same – EB.

Laura’s last name is also Bronson.

Brown just happens to pick a boy psychic out of all the dozens and dozens of orphans he must have seen on his tour of the orphanages.

Laura just happens to be “adjoining-door” close to Chris Blau, a known felon.

Chris just happened to be fingering Masters’ reading glasses in his hamper on that occasion when he just happened to have wandered into Masters bedroom while Masters was away.

“I imagine Vegas would set odds at about what? 1,000,000 to one – perhaps 100,000,000 to one – that all this actually was merely coincidence,” he said aloud, but to himself.

Scenario Number Two: That the Brown/Hanzik operation was a legitimate, honest, fully altruistic undertaking.

The threats and accidents would then indeed be perpetrated by some outside person or group. Perhaps some enemy of Brown. Perhaps someone who has a claim to Hans – a relative seeing the boy as a meal ticket but needing him back on European soil in order to obtain custody.

Money from E O F was being dispensed all quite properly and in the fashion expected of a not-for-profit organization.

Why would Brown keep Hans in the dark about the actual income and expenses? To keep him from being tempted to become a greedy little psychic, perhaps?

Masters had to get an accurate report on the E O F’s actual disbursements and capital held in reserve.

He quickly did some re-figuring of their income potential. At a conservative 60 Readings a week, and \$1,000 each, that would be \$60,000 a week times, say only 50 weeks a year - \$3,000,000. Or, at the \$100 rate, \$6,000 a week and \$300,000 a year. Three percent of that second figure would come to about \$180 a week – not even enough to handle one day’s motel bill. Of course, Hans’ explanation about Evan making up the difference out of his own pocket was plausible. It was important to get a statement of the income and expenses of Business Front, Inc. So far, Willy had drawn a blank.

The odds for this scenario were somewhat better than for number one but Masters would not bet on it either.

Scenario Number Three: Evan and Hans were in cahoots in a scam.

Hans might have felt so beholding to Brown that he’d do anything the man asked of him. Could a fifteen-year-old play that part so convincingly that he could fool a seasoned old detective?

How did the scam work? Did Laura get the information on the locals and somehow feed it to Hans who impressed everyone with his amazing, “gifted pronouncements”. Or, perhaps, the boy did have the ‘gift’ and legitimately depended on it as the source for his information.

Each of the three doctors knew something that could shut down the operation so they were killed. Of course, that could have been the case in several other scenarios, as well.

Perhaps Hans did know about the money skimming and he, with his convincing appearance of innocence, was the one who led the authorities to think the income was far less, so the rest could be stashed or laundered.

If Hans and Laura were both in on a scam, why would Hans have repeatedly pointed out her presence? Why would he have mentioned that she had apparently been other places he had performed? Perhaps as a false lead to a possible source for the threats, should such a diversion be needed.

That was Masters least favorite scenario. He had grown fond of the young man.

Scenario Number Four: Brown was a con artist and Hans really did not know it.

The threats and attempts against Hans were really meant to hurt Brown who had wronged someone earlier.

Or, Brown fabricated the threats and staged the attempts. Why? Perhaps to see that Hans became and remained even more dependent on Brown – for protection.

Or, to engage local law enforcement agencies so they would become distracted from the possibility of a scam. But, if that were the case, why Masters and not the local police?

If Hans were not the gifted clairvoyant that he would have to be in order to make all of this work, there had to be some method of augmenting any true skills so he received the necessary information. Perhaps Willy's scanning of the FM bands would pay off. If that were to be so, it would be hard to hold Hans guiltless.

It bothered Masters greatly to believe it came down to such a choice – either Hans was the psychic of all psychics or he was a major player in a sophisticated and expertly orchestrated scam.

Could it be one of those 'any means is acceptable if it leads to the desired end' beliefs – in his case providing provisions for the needy, innocent children in Eastern Europe regardless of the means necessary to achieve it? Idealistic fifteen-year-olds are often gullible. Cults depend on it. Back when Hans began all this, at ten, it would have been relatively simple to present it as a game or magic show used to entertain the audience.

Scenario Number Five: Hans truly was the greatest psychic who had ever lived.

If so, Laura would apparently play no role in the scam, so why was she present? Even in this scenario the boy might or might not be in on the scam and the only true con here would then be the money skimmed by Brown for some other purpose.

The finger print on the glasses could have been left behind when Chris – known shady character - was rifling the wealthy, Flint's home, in search of hidden

'treasure'.

Masters truly wished – for the boy's sake – that Hans was indeed the gifted psychic he appeared to be. He doubted it – not the young man's belief in his gift – but in the gift itself or at least the extent of its power.

Scenario Number Six: Han's skill was somehow being augmented.

Hans either knew that was so, or he didn't. It seemed certain that if he was being fed information he would have to know that. After all, Masters reasoned, you either hear words or you read them. How else could the data be presented? It would have to be in a form that the boy would not recognize as intentional messages and he as much as said he didn't hear words – just sensed things. But if not recognized as a message, how could it be utilized? Perhaps those would turn out to be the crucial, case-solving, questions.

Masters' brain ached! It was well past time for him to turn in. He secured all the doors and windows and set the house alarm before going upstairs. As he passed Hans' room he saw the door was standing wide open and the bedside lamp was still on.

"Two beds in the room and they end up sprawled out, head to head, shivering on the floor," he whispered to himself with a smile and shake of the head. Taking blankets from the closet, he arranged one over each young man, and turned out the light.

Masters was reminded of Hans' comment that he should have had children of his own. He allowed the thought to linger, pleasantly, for a moment. Soon, however both it and Masters had been put to rest – just for the night, mind you!

CHAPTER SIX

Day Four: Morning

Jerry decided to sleep in. Friendship went just so far among teenagers and getting up and at it at five a.m. wasn't to be part of it that morning. He'd make his way home at a more reasonable hour and give Hans a call that evening.

Hans was downstairs and all ready to go well ahead of schedule – 5:45.

“Ready so soon?” Masters asked, surprised to see the young man descending the stairs.

“Not a tanning cream morning. Gives me extra time. I thought maybe we could take the back trail to town – the one through the woods. Jerry told me about it.”

“It's beautiful in there. Sure. It will be a grand way to start the day. One thing, however.”

“What's that?”

“I'm sure Jerry also told you that among the young folks around here it's popularly known as 'make-out lane'. I just don't want you getting any ideas this morning. I don't put out on my first walk through the woods.”

“Hans paused a moment before determining Masters was pulling his leg.”

“I promise to stay on my side of the trail.”

“Well, okay then.”

They were soon winding their way through the oaks and pines along a trail flanked by violets and

untold other species of low lying greenery. Masters used the time to learn more about his new young friend.

“It appears that your hearing is perfectly normal, now.”

“20/20, so to speak as far as I can tell. Dr. Carey is . . . was . . . some kind of surgeon I guess.”

“Apparently,” Masters agreed. “Do you know any of the specific details – what was done? Where? How? I’m fascinated.”

“Well, before the surgery, Dr. Watson tried to explain it to me – in greatly oversimplified terms, I assume, because now that I’ve studied human anatomy in my school work, what he said doesn’t really make sense. I suppose he was just trying to put my mind at ease.”

“He told you . . . ?”

“The deaf thing, you mean? I was – am – very good at speech reading – most people call it lip reading. What I didn’t understand, he wrote out for me.”

“So, you didn’t ever get the accurate details then?”

“No. It’s one reason I wish Dr. Carey was still around – that’s pretty selfish I suppose.”

“I imagine Evan would know, wouldn’t he,” Masters suggested.”

Hans smiled.

“Probably not, actually. He’s the kind that finds people who are the best at things and then just lets them do it. He doesn’t want to be bothered with the details.”

There was a short period of silence.

“What I do know, Ray, is that these solar cells on my neck . . .” he pulled back his hair so Masters could see them “provide the power for some tiny implanted device that allows me to hear. It must be the world’s smallest amplifier – probably just a chip or two.”

“May I examine them,” Masters asked.

“Sure.”

They stopped and Masters moved closer as Hans continued his explanation.

“There are twelve cells, three across and four down. Each one is about as thick as a sheet of paper and half the size of a postage stamp. I remember being told they were glued and stitched in place. I have to keep them dry – it won’t

ruin them if they get wet but it's best if they stay dry. When I shower and shampoo, I put a little water tight bandage over them."

Masters arranged the boy's hair back into place and they continued up the trail.

"It's the reason for the long hair, I suppose."

"One reason. Mr. Brown says it's also an important part of the image."

"I wonder how they receive enough light to produce power under all that hair?" Masters asked, not expecting an answer.

"I wondered that right from the beginning – I hadn't had a hair cut in years when Mr. Brown found me. Doc – Mrs. McDuffy – said it helped us stay warm during the winters and we'd keep it wet to stay cool in the summer. But your question – Dr. Watson explained that the cells are so super-sensitive that just by the natural movement and separation of my hair they receive plenty of light. My hair is really fine – you probably noticed. However, it works, it works. Whenever I'm doing a program or Readings there is a pretty powerful spot light focused on the left side of my neck and face. I'm sure that helps, too. I plan to find another expert someday and have him explain the details to me."

"It is uncomfortable?"

"At first it was but now I'm so used to it I forget it's there. I'd probably miss it. Brenda felt it yesterday in the limo before I remembered to say anything about it to her. I figured it would freak her out but it didn't. I told her about it and she thought it was wonderful – just like me, she said. She must have the softest hands on the continent."

Before the boy's fantasies completely overtook his consciousness, Masters needed one more piece of information.

"I hadn't realized that you began seeing Dr. Watson before the surgery."

"Yeah. As soon as we got to the States, in fact. I probably had a half dozen sessions before I went into

the hospital.”

“You mostly just talked with him about the operation at that time, then, I suppose?”

“No. Not really. He spent most of the time helping me learn how to relax. He said it was important if the surgery was to go well. I really wanted it to go well so I did my best.”

“How did he help you?”

“This is going to sound off the wall but it was like he hypnotized me with my eyes open. What he said was like what you hear in movies with hypnotists. I read his lips, of course, instead of actually hearing him. The time just flew by. I’d think we had just started and he’d be shaking my shoulder for me to . . . I don’t know what to call it . . . to wake up is as close as I can come.”

“You must have been an excellent hypnotic subject.”

“That’s what Dr. Watson said.”

“Is that pretty much what continued in your sessions after the operation, if I’m not prying.”

“No, I don’t mind talking to you about it. Jerry says I’m way too open about myself. He says guys my age don’t talk about certain things. He’s going to like tutor me in the fine art of being a normal fifteen-year-old. If I would be around a little longer he said he’d teach me to play the guitar. He’s great according to Brenda.

“But I keep wandering off from your questions. We always began each session talking about adjusting to my new life. Then he’d spend time teaching me how to clear my mind and to use my psychic gift. Like I told you, I think I hit puberty pretty early, I guess – between ten and eleven.

“You say you’d practice using your gift?”

“Yeah. I’d clear my mind and he’d ask me questions that I’d answer.”

“Questions?”

“Yeah, like he’d have things written on sheets of paper and he’d read something silently and I’d tell him what it said. Then he’d show it to me so I could see how accurate I’d been. Sometimes he’d hide little things in his office before I’d get there and ask me to find them – like – “Where is the green golf ball? Or “Where is the Hershey bar? Sometimes he’d hand me a book and ask “On what page does the character, John

Mason, propose to Ann? I got so I could always do all that stuff.”

“Very impressive!”

“Yeah! It really is. At first I wanted to talk with him about how I was able to do all those things but he said if I wondered about it too much, I might lose the gift so I just stopped thinking about it. I just accept that I have it and that’s that.”

Their conversation had taken them up through the woods and back out onto the sidewalk one block behind Willy’s TV Repair Shop. The real world returned.

“I really don’t like Maggie’s egg pies,” Hans said. “Suppose I’d hurt her feelings if I ordered pancakes?”

“I thought knowing such things was your line – not mine?”

Hans smiled. Then Masters noted the slightest frowning of the boy’s brow, as if the question had suddenly caused him some consternation. Masters didn’t comment.

“While we’re on that topic,” Masters continued as they turned the corner at Willy’s and headed up the block toward the diner, “Have you thought anymore about the incident in the limo the other night?”

“I have, actually. I talked to Jerry about it, in fact. Looking back on it, it seems to me the driver had us in the ditch way before he could have really seen any danger from the oncoming car. I think it was because we were already at a dead stop that I was able to get such a clear look at the car. I can’t explain it but that’s how I remember it. Maybe we should ask Mr. Brown and the driver.”

“Any more thoughts about not receiving a warning message that night – a feeling – whatever – about that impending accident?”

“I hadn’t thought much about it. But maybe, since, like I just said, it couldn’t have really turned into an accident, there was no danger message to receive.”

That answer seemed to fully satisfy Hans. It didn’t begin to satisfy Masters.

Maggie delivered the 'bad' news.

"Egg man didn't show this morning, so I'm afraid you'll have to settle for cereal or pancakes from yesterday's batter."

Masters looked at Hans who smiled – almost smugly.

"Pancakes for me then, Ma'am," he said.

"Same here, my dear," Masters added, and she returned to the kitchen.

"Return that Egg Man this instant, young man, or I'll ground you for eggzactly one week," was Masters' playful response.

"Shell I do that right now, Sir, or wait until you're finished making yolks about it?"

The exchange produced a good and prolonged chuckle between them.

Neither would try to explain the misplaced Egg Man. Hans felt no reason to question it. Masters reminded himself that sometimes coincidences are really just coincidences!

* * *

By nine a.m. Hans was well settled into his morning Readings. Masters had tried repeatedly to get Jim in New York. The fourth call finally found the detective at his desk.

"What makes you think you can have a life away from that phone, James?"

"Breakfast with my granddaughter. She's just in town for a few days."

"Melanie?"

"Yup!"

"You're allowed, then."

"I got a bonus for you, Ray. That Blau guy, Chris – He rented a speed boat out of Key West the day before the Carey accident and returned it the afternoon following the accident. Traced him there through a car rental out of New York City. Dumb luck but I'll take it however it comes."

"Jim, if Flint ever writes about this case, he'll have to call it the Case of Confounding Coincidences."

"The courts tend to call such coincidences, circumstantial evidence, you know," Jim reminded.

"You know I've never presented a case to the DA on circumstantials."

“And you’re probably the only cop on record who never has!!”

Masters ignored what he assumed was a complement.

“One more thing, this morning, Jim. Would Blau’s middle initial happen to be ‘A’ as in Allen?”

“Let me look here – take me just a second – my desk’s a mess – you still getting on well with that mind-reading, psychic kid or whatever he is?”

“An interesting question. We’ll skip defining ‘well’ and I’ll just say, yes, very well.”

“I have no idea what you just meant but we can skip that too. Here, I found it. Do you suppose that psychic stuff rubs off?”

“What do you mean?”

Blau’s middle name – it’s Allen. Do you have his service record, by the way?”

“Infantry, marksman, hand to hand training. Eventually drummed out as incorrigible.”

“That’s about it. He started out in the signal corps but was apparently booted out for social problems. He actually ended up in front-line infantry training. He must be some piece of work.”

“Enough to make a father proud, I’m sure. Thanks, my friend. Give your granddaughter a kiss from Uncle Ray.”

So, a hand to hand expert and a snapped neck. A marksman and a bullet into the center of a fuel tank as both boats bobbed in the waves and moved along at high speed. His brief stint in the signal corps suddenly raised more possibilities.

The next call was to Colonel Carman, a high-ranking officer in the National Police in the Cayman Islands.

“Raymond Masters here, Colonel – from the States – the jewel thief with the monkey and the aerosol banana, about eight years ago.”

“Mr. Masters. Raymond. Yes. An unexpected pleasure, Sir. You are well?”

“I am fat and sassy, as we say, but in need of a

local snoop down your way.”

“For you, Sir, anything.”

“I need information about income and disbursements from a not-for-profit registered in your beautiful country.”

“Won’t be easy – Not-for’s are closely protected here. They bring in a huge amount of revenue.”

“That’s why I called you, Carman.”

“Lay it on a bit thicker and I’ll get you the tax records on the Governor, himself.”

“Perhaps another time. Now, it’s the E O F – European Orphans Foundation. Probably has the name Evan Brown attached to it. Maybe Hans Hanzik or Elliott Bronson, an Englishman, I am guessing.”

“I’ll begin immediately. I think one of my sergeant’s wives works at the Department of Registration. It suddenly seems he should be up for promotion.”

“I’d rather not know the ‘how’, just the ‘what’.”

“Oh yes, scruples. I remember.”

“I assume you’ve captured my phone number. The room to ring at this end is 212.”

Hey hung up.

At eleven, Willy dropped by.

“Zilch, Sir!”

“Not the beginning I’d hoped for, my boy.”

“I’ve scanned every possible frequency. I get cop signals, air planes, stray cell phones, even the Home Shopping Network for a short time but nothing that seems even remotely related to Hans, Brown or any of this. About all I have to show for the morning is a good deal on diamond ear rings for Ellen’s upcoming birthday. There just is no voice transmission on any known frequency and that’s that.”

“Well, we gave it the old college try. Wrap it up, I suppose.”

“On another front, I have some interesting news.”

“I’m well past ready for ‘interesting’.”

“The surveillance tapes produced a ‘bingo’ Sir, if I may borrow your patented phrase. It shows Blau leaving his motel room through the outside, ground-level, door, going to an older green and white van and opening it with a key – so I assume it is his – removing a car door jimmy bar, using it to

forcibly enter the stolen car and driving away. That was about fifteen minutes before the incident with the limo. It wasn't returned 'til 4:10 a.m. – he left it just inside the back entrance to the parking lot – the safest place not to be seen, I imagine. He re-locked the door – out of habit I guess – you'd think he'd have realized that the owner would notice it had been moved.”

“And 4:10 would seem to be a pretty safe time of day – or night as it were. Great work, Son.”

“Shall I have him picked up?”

“No. Let's give him his head. If he's in cahoots with Evan, I don't want us to tip our hand.”

“And what is our hand, Sir?”

“I wish I knew, Willy. I wish I knew! We probably should find that limo driver and see if he knows anything. Something Hans said to me this morning set me to wondering.”

“I'm on it. It was a Ft. Smith Limo service. It may take a few hours.”

“Well, it seems that would be a better use of our time than listening for nonexistent radio signals around here. You're sure your usual duties aren't calling you?”

“Let's see – Jay walkers? No, we don't have an ordinance about jay walking. Bank robbers? Woops, no bank. Truants? That's right no school here anymore. Rush hour traffic. I counted four bikes and a jeep yesterday at Five there at the intersection of Main and Chestnut. Guess that pretty well frees me up, Sir.”

“Oh, for the small-town life!” Masters sighed with his wonderful full cheeked smile. Willy left by the rear stairs. Twenty minutes later he called in.

“Good news and bad news, Sir. The good news is that the limo driver is not dead. The bad news is he was run down in a hit and run about midnight on the evening of the limo accident. He's barely hanging on at a Ft. Smith hospital. I've alerted the police there about the possibilities. If he regains consciousness, they'll try and ask the questions. No witness to the accident so far. The driver – a Tom Short, single, age 62 – lives alone in a fairly isolated area of town. Get this though,

Brown specifically asked for Short to be the driver that night. Said he'd used him in the past."

"Twenty minutes well spent, Willy. How about getting back to your search for Inc. clients, then?"

"One dead end after another on that one, Sir, but let me try a few new angles. We may have to wait 'til we can gain access to their books."

"That will be too late. Hop to!"

Willy left.

It would seem that being employed to work for Hans was a deadly engagement – Watson, Carey, Mann and now Short. The long shot was that it represented some elaborate scheme to set up Evan – make him the fall guy. The more likely answer was that Evan took great care to protect his multi-million-dollar cash machine – Hans.

Masters reached for the phone and dialed.

"Willy. Masters here. Say, can you check out the registration on that van that seems to belong to our Christopher Allen Blau?"

"Sure. Give me ten minutes."

* * *

"Willy, here, Sir. Confusing registration on that van. Doubt if it puts us any closer to Brown."

"So far all you have for me is fluff. Bottom line, please!"

"The van is registered to a business in Indiana – Dutch Blond Enterprises, in Cloverdale. I can't even find it on the map."

"You may have struck pay dirt, Willy. Find out everything you can about Dutch Blond. I hope you're keeping track of all these long-distance calls. I get the idea they could wipe out your phone budget for the year."

"I got 'em all neatly logged, Sir."

For the first time since having smelled something rotten in Evan's basket, Masters felt encouraged. He looked at his watch. Thirty minutes until Hans would be free for lunch. As usual, Evan had been escorting the clients to the room and then immediately getting on his cell phone. He never so much as glanced through the open door into the room that Masters occupied.

'He feels cool and safe. That puts him in his most

vulnerable position,' Masters thought.

Again, the phone rang.

"Colonel Carman, Mr. Masters, Cayman Islands. About E O F. It was established five years ago. Took in between three and four hundred thousand dollars last years. That's remained pretty steady back three years – a bit less before that. It seems to disburse all but \$2,500 every year. It appears in every way legitimate as far as I can tell. No red flags in its file."

"Who are its officers?"

"Let's see. Evan Brown is president. Hans Hanzik is treasurer and ... hum ... the secretary is listed only as 'silent partner'. That's not unusual down here. I hadn't notice it though. I can look further into it if you want."

"I will be forever in your debt if you can find that third name."

"That certainly provides ample motivation, Sir. I'll get on it. By the way it lists only one employee if that's of any interest to you."

"Palzic in Prague?"

"Yes, Sir, I might have known you'd know. Ulga Palzic, if a first names if of any help."

"Thanks for the verification, Colonel. Until later."

Willy popped in as Masters hung up.

"Are cell phones not the coolest gadgets ever invented or what?" he said in an apparently irrelevant piece of conversation, then continued. "Anyway, back to that Dutch Blond Enterprises . . ."

Masters interrupted.

] "Two partners – Brown and Hanzik."

"Right on the money, Sir. A hunch?"

"A hunch and a little help from a Dutch boy."

It went over Willy's head, but that never seemed to concern him.

"Say," Masters said, thinking out loud, "Wasn't it from Cloverdale, Indiana where one of those checks came – the contest winner I believe?"

"That's right. So, we have a link from the contest winner to Cloverdale. Cloverdale ties into Dutch Blond.

Dutch Blond to the van, and the van to Chris Blau,” Willy said as if to verify the connections.

“And Chris to Laura, don’t forget that door between their rooms. If you can connect the Dutch Blond bank account to INC, we’ll be well on our way around third, Willy.”

“Short of a court order, Sir, I don’t see how we can do that and I doubt if we have sufficient cause to get one.”

“Not yet, I imagine. Keep your thinking cap on. You better skedaddle before Hans arrives. Your presence here just now would be hard to explain.

As the door to the stair well swung closed, Hans emerged from the Reading Room twisting his neck and stretching himself back into an upright position.

“Did you have a good morning, Ray?” He asked getting right to the task of changing clothes. “I’d think you’d be bored out of your skull – that’s one of Jerry’s favorite expressions – but I’d think it must apply – you just sitting around here all day like this with nothing to do.”

“I’m managing just fine. How about the truck stop across the highway this noon? I’m told they serve the best chicken fried steak in the State.”

“I don’t believe I’ve ever had chicken fried steak – it’s a humorous name for food. I see this big chicken wearing a flopped over chef’s cap, slaving away at a hot griddle.”

Masters just shook his head. Five minutes later they were settled into an oversized booth – most truck stops seem to have them for some reason – and had placed their order.

“And how did your morning go, young man?” Masters asked, attempting to get a conversation underway.

“Very well I think. Sometimes, you know, I can’t believe that what I have to tell folks can possibly be accurate, but it always is. I really am amazed. It’s such a strange feeling. I used to hold back on some of the more off-the-wall things, but when I spoke to Mr. Brown about that he said I needed to just trust my gift and pass everything on, so that’s what I do, now.”

“You mention Mr. Brown. I’ve been wondering something. If it’s too private just say so.”

“Okay. Shoot!”

The boy’s brow furrowed a bit.

“When he adopted you, why did you not take his last

name – change it from Hanzik to Brown?”

“I really wanted to. At first, he said I should wait to make such a big decision until after I’d lived my new life for a while. Then, if I still wanted to, we could talk about it. When I was twelve, I told him I wanted to do it – become Hans Brown and keep my last name for a middle name – I don’t have a middle name. He explained that, by then, I was so well known by my own name that I needed to keep it – part of the image. And, he thought for money raising purposes, it was best if people still thought of me as an orphan rather than as his son. I could see the logic in it –since we are working for the orphans – so I dropped it. I haven’t pressed him on it since. Actually, I think it was a good decision. I like being Hans Hanzik – it has a nice ring to it. I still do wish I had a middle name. I guess I can add one legally someday, if I decide to, can’t I?”

“You can add three middle names if you want to. You’re quite sure you have no middle name?”

“I once got a quick glance at the adoption papers. They had my birth certificate attached. There was no middle name on either paper.”

“In what country did the adoption take place?”

“I’m not sure, actually. I’ve never thought about that. I suppose the United States. This is where we were when he showed me the official papers. It was soon after the operation.”

“You didn’t have to appear before a judge then.”

“No. The lawyers took care of it, I imagine. Mr. Brown seems to have lots of lawyers.”

The boy clearly trusted Evan’s judgment and had bought his reasoning on the subject.

The food was served and Hans attacked it as if he had just spent the morning at a full pad football practice.

“Tired this morning?” Masters asked.

“Not really. Thanks for the blankets by the way. We were laying there talking and I guess we just drifted off. It was a great day yesterday. It has to rank in the top half dozen of my entire life. I’m going to miss Jerry

and Brenda so much when we move on. I try not to think about it. We agreed to talk by phone but I don't know how long that will last, you know?"

Hans became quiet and looked out the front window across at the motel and on to the low, rolling, green hills and the clear blue sky beyond.

"It's beautiful out there, you know?" he said. "I could like living here."

His reverie was interrupted.

"That van. See that van!" He pointed and Masters looked. "The white van with the green markings."

"Yes, I see it. Want one like it?"

"No. I mean I've seen it lots of times – lots of places. It's like that lady with the gold glasses. It seems to show up wherever I go. Do you think it might belong to her?"

"That's a possibility," Masters said.

He had crossed his fingers since the fact was that it was actually Hans who owned it through Dutch Blond.

"I wish I knew what she was up to. I don't get any feelings – she's just like neutral."

"A knock-out like her and you still don't get any feelings?"

Hans smiled briefly.

"Well, yeah, she's gorgeous – I didn't mean neutral in a boy-girl sense."

"She is definitely a girl, I'd say," Masters teased.

Hans' smile continued and he turned back to Masters.

"So, is there a lady in your life, if that's not too personal?"

"No one lady."

"Playing the field, I guess?"

"I guess."

Clearly that conversation was going to stop far short of any intimate details.

"Jerry's never had sex either, so I guess I'm not as far behind as I figured I was."

It was one of those out of blue, fully unexpected 'Hansisms' Masters was learning to accept. It was not a practiced topic for Masters so he remained silent.

"Mr. Brown got me a book when I was twelve but it's a

lot more helpful to talk it all over with another guy.”

Masters swallowed hard and hoped ‘guy’ referred to Jerry and not to him. Apparently, it did.

“What are the plans for this evening?” Hans asked, clearly laying the groundwork for a suggestion or two of his own.

“I figured you’d have some ideas.”

Hans leaned forward, demonstrating more than a little enthusiasm for what he was about to present.

“How about this? I take Brenda to the diner for dinner at five thirty. Then we – Brenda and me – can go for a walk on the trail in the woods until seven or so. I’ll walk her home and pick up Jerry and he can come back here and stay the night again.”

“Too bad you haven’t given this any thought,” Masters said smiling, then continued.

“That’s all fine but you know I’ll have to be within easy ear shot. We may need to arrange for some transportation in there somewhere. My old legs are already screaming at me about the plan you just outlined.”

“Great! Let’s get back to the Motel so I can call them.”

“Sounds fine. Same rules, you understand?”

“The hands things? Yes. I understand. I talked about all that with Jerry and I think that he seems to mostly agree with those rules.”

He then broke into a broad grin.

“What he said, exactly, was, ‘If you try anything with Brenda she doesn’t like, I’ll personally castrate you.’”

“Yes, I’d say that’s pretty much the same message,” Masters said, more than a little relieved. “It sounds like you two came to an understanding, of sorts.”

The arrangements were soon made. Masters marveled at the young man’s self-control. From the time he began changing clothes for the afternoon until he walked out the door, the hormone driven fifteen year old boy transformed into a calm, cool, totally focused

young professional. And just as amazing to Masters was the fact that the lad could actually change his pants standing up!

CHAPTER SEVEN

Day Four: Afternoon

Masters, too, needed to regain his focus though for some strange reason images of attractive older ladies invaded his mind – ‘Surely, teen-boy hormones aren’t contagious,’ he mused to himself with a deep sigh. “Well, I can always hope!”

The first call of the afternoon was from Colonel Carman.

“This is the latest on E O F financial transactions and it’s probably all I’m going to get.”

“I’ll take it, whatever it is.”

“Well, in a way it seems strange. There’s a bank account in the National Bank – that’s not strange, it’s required of all not-fors. However, every single deposit that’s ever been made into the account was made on the first banking day of the month and was from a very strangely named company – Dutch Blond Enterprises – out of the First State Bank in a place called Cloverdale, Indiana.”

“It doesn’t seem strange to me, Colonel. It’s a logical connection though I’m not sure how it’s going to help.”

“About that silent partner. This is going to seem pretty juvenile but the best I could get from my inside informant was the person’s initials. She’s afraid for her job and like I told you our economy needs the ‘not-for’s’ so they are guarded like gold. Providing inside information is akin to armed robbery down here.

Anyway, the initials are E.A.B. I had her recheck it because those are also the initials of Evan Allen Brown and I thought she might have doubled up on him. Not so. The two of them just happen to have the same initials. Hope that's some help, Sir."

"Probably more than either of us realizes just now. I certainly appreciate all your help. Watch those long, beautiful, sunsets for me 'til I get back."

"Certainly. And when will that be?"

"I wish I knew, but sometime, for sure."

So, the weekly receipts must be funneled to Cloverdale and then once each month some portion disbursed to the Cayman Islands account. With both the not-for-profit incorporation and the main bank account there, Brown had engineered a safe and virtually anonymous operation. Still, everything seemed on the up and up if one were to base the operation on \$100 per Reading. That discrepancy had to be Brown's Achilles heel. But how could Masters make use of that?

More perplexing yet to Masters was, if the E O F was operating strictly within the law, why go to the trouble of working out of the Cayman Islands – why not just Cloverdale, Indiana? Basing in the Cayman Islands immediately gave reason for suspicion. Evan was too smart to risk that if there were not some important reason behind it all.

Masters called Willy.

"Hope you have something wonderful for me," he began.

"I don't know how wonderful but I do have something. Brown has been taking his daily receipts to a bank in Ft. Smith every day at 5:30 pm – a 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. bank. I just stumbled onto it. Ellen Baker's friend is a teller there and Ellen was telling her about Jerry's new friend and one thing led to another. You know how that goes when women start talking"

"Yes, and that's never true between men, of course," Masters added, hoping to provide a mild reality check.

Either Willy ignored it or it went over his head. He continued.

"Her friend attended Hans' first performance here and

the story jogged her into recognizing that it was Mr. Brown who was the mysterious, new, regular, late afternoon, big cash depositor.”

“Cash! Can you press the teller for more specifics?”

“I can. That’s not public information, of course. It would have been less than legally obtained and probably not admissible in court.”

“When Brown’s House of Cards begins to tumble, no one piece of evidence will be that crucial. See what you can find out. Better yet, if you know a competent and honest private detective around here, have him look into it for me. That way you’ll be protected and the courts tend give us private guys a lot more latitude.”

“I know just the guy – well, he’s a gal but she’s 100% trustworthy.”

“Have her send me the bill. It needs to be done today, Willy. Today!”

The next call was back to Jim in New York City.

“I’m counting on lots of helpful news this afternoon, Jim.”

“Well, I have lots of news. You’ll have to determine if it’s helpful or not. First, I got back to Geoffrey Hook in Bosnia. The rest of his info is quite short and to the point. Dr. McDuffy – Margaret, the woman who took care of the Hanzik kid – told Geoff that the boy’s hearing loss had not been due to any blow on his head. In fact, there was no evidence of any physical trauma at all. She called it ‘hysterical deafness’ – his mind just shut off his ability to hear – probably in the heat of the terribly loud and terrifying mortar attack on the bus he was riding in. The bus was destroyed and many of the children were badly injured. He was only four and a half, and had just lost both his parents. She said she had seen dozens of similar reactions – paralysis, blindness, muteness – all hysterical in nature.”

“Oh, my!” Masters said. “I certainly didn’t see that one coming. No verification of that opinion, I

suppose.”

“It’s your lucky day, Ray. We got Dr. Watson’s private case files – his wife found them hidden in a safe in their home. He was preparing an article for a journal – A Case Study of the Successful Treatment of Hysterical Deafness Due To War Trauma in a Five Year Old Male. It’s eighteen pages long.”

“And half of that would seem to be its title, “Masters joked.

“Academicians! It’s on an old floppy. I’ve already emailed it to you through your Officer Rakes. It details Watson’s use of hypnosis in the treatment. There are also some cryptic handwritten case notes we’ve scanned and attached to the email.”

“Cryptic?”

“Vague references. Never anything specific – as if intentionally trying to hide things. Like, ‘Today Hans’ reception was phenomenal. He is a brilliant boy who conditions quickly in a trance state’.”

“You are a fountain of interesting information today.”

“There’s more – from hospital records. His actual surgery records are still missing but the O.R. Use Records are intact.”

“O.R. Use Records?”

“The hospital in which the surgery was performed keeps records that detail which operating room was used, for how long, names of the physician’s and those who assisted. This gets sort of complicated so sit down, old man.”

Masters smiled silently.

“We old men are always sitting down, Jim. Who should know that better than you?”

Jim ignored the barb.

“The operation took two hours fifteen minutes – his usual time for similarly titled procedures is five hours thirty minutes. Usually there was an anesthesiologist, an intern and at least three nurses with him. In Hans’ case, Carey did the anesthetic himself, had no nurse, and only Dr. Mann was present with him.”

“Well, quite clearly it was not the usual operation and now I guess we know why – there was not the usual hearing problem to correct.”

“One more thing from McDuffy. She was surprised when Brown showed up to visit her place. Arrangements had been made by some ‘Aid Society’ in London for someone named Bronson – Elliott Bronson to be there. Brown’s credentials were in order. He actually made two visits – the second one two months later. That’s when he took the Hanzik kid. I suppose it took that long to arrange the legal stuff.”

“I sure appreciate all the information.”

“Don’t hurry off, now. There’s one more tidbit here for which you will always be in my debt.”

“I’m waiting!”

“On a still open case in Florida, there’s a warrant for Blau in relation to the theft of three cases of rifles and a quantity of ammo from a gun dealer in Key Largo eight to ten hours before the boating accident. His prints were everywhere. Doesn’t appear to be very smart about such things.”

“James, my friend, take your lovely wife to dinner at the fanciest place you can find and send me the tab.”

“You know I will.”

“Oh, yes. I’m sure of that. One more thing – since I get the idea this is going to cost me big time – there’s a Laura Bronson here – apparently, a prostitute from your fair city who used to work high class clients. It seems to be the same name she used there. Rakes traced her back. I’m looking for a connection to Evan Brown. She and Blau seem to be associated in some way – maybe co-workers, maybe lovers – maybe both.”

“I’ll see what I can turn up – after dinner, of course.”

* * *

An hour passed. Masters could only wait around for the information to arrive. He looked at the beautiful view from the window. He paced. He even paged through some of Han’s books. At 2:10 he heard from Willy.

“Good stuff, Sir.” He began.

“I like good stuff, Officer. Give!”

“I got the partners in Inc. – Business Front, Inc.”

“May I guess?”

“It’s your nickel, Sir.”

“Evan Brown, Hans Hanzik, and the Englishman, Elliot Bronson.

“You’re right on,” Willy said, clearly delighted. “I went ahead and faxed Brown’s pictures to Scotland Yard – can you believe that – Willy Rakes working with Scotland Yard? Anyway, I asked for a visual ID on it as either Evan Brown or Elliott Bronson.”

“Very good work, Willy! If we can establish they are one and the same person, we’ve got our door opened into Inc’s records, because, as you know, it’s illegal to serve on a corporate board under two names.”

“Gee, Sir, I guess I did better than I realized. I got one more thing on Laura. She was on the payroll of a company in NYC called TransAtlantic Lmted. It no longer seems to be in business. Your Jim in New York hooked me up with a guy in vice who reported that though it hadn’t been proved, it seemed to be a blackmail operation in which wealthy foreign business men used TransAtlantic to handle their U. S. business trips into New York City. Laura would provide ‘feminine services,’ you might say, which were filmed through a one-way mirror, and the rich guys paid through their plackets to buy the evidence. The sole proprietor of TransAtlantic was a guy named Barry Easton – It’s the EB initials in reverse. He was just a name. No one ever seemed to meet him – though my guy in NYC is still looking into that.”

“Superior work, Officer. Take your best girl to dinner on me.”

“Really!”

“Absolutely. I run a tab at J. D. China in Fayetteville. I’ll call ahead for you.”

‘At this rate, I’ll bankrupt myself,’ Masters chuckled as he hung up. He was further amused that Rakes now thought of himself as having his own ‘guy’ in the NYPD.”

2:55. The phone rang again. It was Jim. Masters spoke first.

“Well, have you discovered yet that Laura was part of an alleged blackmail scheme some eight years ago, with a company called TransAtlantic, headed by a reclusive named

Barry Easton?"

"I suppose that means no dessert?" Jim joked.

"No dessert and the tip's on you."

"How in the World?" Jim asked.

"Hey, we have what is probably the finest, part time, one man, self-trained, combination TV repair shop and police department in the country right here at Purdy Crossing."

"I'd say so! TV repair shop?"

"You'd have to be here."

"Well, apparently, I have one piece of info your guy – or half guy or whatever – missed. My guy in vice knew a guy who met Barry Easton face to face once and he ID'd him from the picture of Evan Brown – less the mustache."

"Very good! Okay! Dessert's back on. Thanks."

He hung up the phone and sat back in his chair. Things were beginning to come together, though, if he had anything at all, it was only related to Brown's skimming money from E O F. There was nothing solid on the faking of the psychic Readings and therefore fraud. Briefly, Masters wondered if he should just leave it there. It seemed that to go further would devastate the very basis of everything Hans believed about himself and his mission in life. He couldn't back off, of course.

It caused Masters to reflect on a part of Hans' conversation earlier that morning. He was talking about the upcoming evening with Brenda.

"So, just how close are you going to have to be to me when we're in the woods?" he had asked.

Masters was amused and had answered, "Not necessarily close enough to see you, but close enough to hear a call for help – from either of you for any reason!"

Hans had grinned, turned red and nodded that he understood. It had been a cordial and comfortable time together.

"Such a nice, apparently naive young man,"

Masters said with a sigh. "All of this seems so unfair."

At 3:15 Willy arrived with Dr. Watson's records and article. There was not much new to glean from them beyond what Jim had relayed earlier. One word was repeated in the notes – 'receive' – sometimes, 'reception'. Perhaps it referred to the 'gift'. Perhaps, to something else. One sentence made Masters believe it was, in fact, something else. 'Dr. Mann will be so pleased at the high quality of reception under a wide variety of circumstances.'

Unless Dr. Mann had invented a way to amplify or enhance clairvoyant messages, something else was clearly going on. Yet, Willy's scan had detected nothing.

One of the earliest notes also caught Masters' attention, and if it meant what he thought it meant his heart went out to Hans. It said: The cue upon awakening must be these exact words. 'I love you son. The doctor says that the cure will be permanent'."

Masters read several things into that. Under hypnosis, Hans had probably been hearing Dr. Watson quite normally for many sessions since the doctor's early goal had been to treat the hysterical symptoms. It was necessary to contain the hearing only to the trance state until after the operation. The boy had been led to believe it was the operation that would restore his hearing and that was the necessary cover for whatever had actually been done surgically. The post-hypnotic cue from Brown would allow Hans to begin hearing again without needing to be in the trance. If the only reason Brown had said his words of love to Hans was to provide that cue, that boy had been wronged in the evillest of ways. Masters grew furious just thinking about the possibility – well, probability, in his mind.

By 4:05, when Willy called, Master had regained his composure.

"This is a Bingo with a capital 'B', Sir. I just heard from Scotland Yard . . ."

Masters interrupted.

"So soon? How in the World?"

"Well, I took the liberty of sort of adding a little note to the request!"

"A sort of note?"

“Yeah, I might have said something like, ‘Urgent Priority from Detective Raymond Masters, USA.’”

“Well, I suppose it’s nice to know that they still remember me. Okay – go on. I’ll let you tell me.”

“Brown is Bronson and there is more. Brown had two children – Laura and Christopher. Chris lived with his mother in the United States. Apparently, Bronson/Brown never married her – or anybody. Chris took her name – Blau. Laura’s early life is less clear but they haven’t been able to connect Laura with a mother either in England, Europe or here. Evan was listed as the parent in her early school records in an English town called Devonshire.”

“A double bingo, Willy. Excellent! Excellent! One more thing. Can you find an excuse – short of a warrant – to look inside Blau’s van? I mean a very close and detailed look with pictures!”

“Seems to me I heard somebody tell me that Van’s left tail light was broken – or might soon be. That should be cause enough to look around.”

“You rascal – If you ever need it, I can probably get you a job with a Colonel I know down in the Cayman Islands!”

“Hey, in high school I was voted most likely to run a successful floating crap game. This is a piece of cake.”

“The cop with the shady past, I see. Thanks again.”

He sat back. The veins in his temples throbbed and he pounded the arms of the chair.

“Can you imagine a father encouraging his daughter to prostitute herself, and his son to kill in cold blood! What kind of animal is this? He seems to have no conscience – and certainly no concept whatsoever about how precious our children are.”

Masters’ next thoughts were for Hans’ safety. He was convinced that Hans had been somehow wired to receive messages which were sent to him as the crucial part of Brown’s con game. Just how it worked, he did not yet understand. What he did understand was

that Hans' body, at least from the neck up, was the only truly incriminating evidence against Brown. Given the man's bloody track record, it seemed certain that Brown would not hesitate to dispose of that evidence the minute he felt he was being investigated. In this case a bullet, a snapped neck or a hit and run would not be sufficient. The body would have to be destroyed.

Masters got Willy back on the phone.

"I need a 24-hour close protective surveillance on Hans. I'll be with him of course, but find some off-duty guys. I want at least two there at least within ear shot of the boy at all times – but maintain visual contact as much as possible. Plain clothes and armed of course and strictly – absolutely – hush, hush! I think it's time we take Ellen into our confidence. Lay it out to her – all of it. I'd like Jerry and Brenda to continue being a part of Hans' life for the next few days but I'll certainly understand if she vetoes that."

"I'm right on it. I'll talk with Ellen right now, line up the undercover from the sheriff's office, and then I'll take the first watch myself."

"Good man! And oh, yes. Tell your guys Hans is not to be allowed to go anywhere with Brown, Laura or Chris. Hatch some excuse for them ahead of time. We must not tip our hand to Evan."

"Gotcha."

Hans entered the room at 4:50, finished for the day and eager to get on with the kissing – that is, on with the evening's activities.

"I'll need cash for dinner," he said. I'm not comfortable using your money again so can I write you a check for thirty dollars and then you give me the cash?"

"Certainly. I guess I didn't realize that you had a checking account."

"Yeah. Mr. Brown set it up for me in case of an emergency. I decided that this qualifies."

He filled in the check and handed it to Masters.

"Did I do it right? I haven't written very many."

"Looks fine. I have to chuckle at your company name."

Hans grinned.

"Yeah. That was Mr. Brown's idea – Dutch Blond

Enterprises. I sort of like it, though.”

Hans stroked his long hair. It seemed to represent for him an important tie to his roots –family, not follicles.

The cash was provided.

“I have a wallet somewhere. I never carry one – won’t fit into the tight pants Mr. Brown wants me to wear.”

The wallet was found and with some difficulty inserted into the back pocket.

“You could probably just carry the cash in your shirt pocket if the wallet is uncomfortable.”

“That’s probably a good idea. It must look bad, too. Will I seem to be to ‘dorky’ if I do that shirt pocket thing?”

“I’m afraid I don’t come with an adequate working definition of dorky, Son, but I truly doubt if that one thing will cause you a problem with your starry eyed, Brenda.”

“I’m ready then, I guess. No! Tic Tacs. Where did I put them?”

“Probably left them at the house. Hold out your hand. I’ll share.”

As they started down the hall, Willy appeared.

“Mr. Rakes. What you doing here?” was Hans’ friendly reaction. The boy was plainly pleased to see him.

Willy had no response. Looking at his watch, he realized that he had completely lost track of time.

Masters saved things.

“I arranged for Willy to drive us into town. I figured you didn’t want to show up for your date sweaty from the long walk.”

Hans turned to Masters.

“That was a really nice thing to think of.” And then to Willy, “Thanks, Mr. Rakes.”

“Believe me, Hans, all the credit goes to Mr. Masters and you really have to start calling me Willy. Mr. Rakes is my father. It makes me feel ancient!”

“Okay. I can do that, Willy.” And then, ever

open to a fault, Hans turned back to Masters relating, quite seriously: “And about that sweating thing. I had worried about it, so I used extra deodorant. As an extra precaution, I put some between my legs – A really, REALLY, bad idea, I’ll tell you that!!!”

Willy and Masters winced in unison and then chuckled out loud. Willy ruffled the boy’s hair.

“What?” Hans asked, looking from one to the other.

“There are no words to explain your unique charm,” Masters said. “You’ll just have to wait ‘til your own son is fifteen.”

They dropped Hans off at Brenda’s and then followed the young couple in the car at a discrete distance as they made their way toward the diner. The awkwardness of walking with their arms around each other’s waists soon gave way to the more comfortable gait allowed by hand holding.

“I’d rather not go inside and bother them,” Masters said.

“Marks is inside having coffee and Dunn is out back – probably whittling some trinket for his little daughter.”

“You have it covered.”

“Yes, I do. Now we can get on with the really important issue of the hour – sausage or pepperoni?”

“What?”

Willy took out his cell phone and began poking in numbers.

“Pizza. I’ll have one delivered to us here in the car – now, sausage or pepperoni?”

“Both and it’s on me.”

Twenty minutes later they were enjoying their meal in the car outside the diner, while the young people were enjoying each other, inside. Jerry ‘happened’ by on his bike and stopped to chat, through Willy’s open window. He also made short work of the last piece of pizza.

“Canadian Bacon. Next time you invite me, get Canadian bacon,” he suggested. “So, you guys out serving and protecting,” he asked with a grin.

“Eating pizza, mostly,” Willy answered, not giving the boy any satisfaction. “What are you up to besides checking up on Hans and Brenda?”

“Me. Checking up. No way. Are they in there?”

“Go find a girl of your own!” Willy admonished, good-naturedly.

“I’ll have you know Emily Alfrey and I have been going steady for over a week now.”

“Nice girl,” Willy commented with a nod of approval.

“Nice is not necessarily what I’m going for, old man. Beautiful, gorgeous, uninhibited, passionate ...”

“We get the idea,” Willy interrupted.

“Besides,” Jerry added, “She plays a trap drum set like you’ve never heard. We may just get a band going.”

“Lot’s a luck,” Willy said, all quite sincerely.

“Well, he’s Brenda’s for another hour and twenty-nine minutes. Guess I better get home and eat. By the way, Sir,” Jerry said, bending down and looking across the car past Willy, “I’m bringing the munchies this evening.”

“Fine. I prefer Bugles, if you don’t mind,” Masters said all quite seriously.

Jerry did a double take.

“He’s kidding,” Willy said, interpreting for the boy.

“Who’s kidding? Masters added.

Jerry shoved off from the car, made a sweeping U-turn, and was off toward home.

“I talked to his mother. She said if we think he’s safe with Hans, that’s good enough for her.”

“Well, do we think he’s safe with Hans?” Masters asked, as much to himself as to Willy.

“I hope we do. I’ve been thinking. Should we put a tail on Brown in case he tries anything with Hans?”

“I wondered that myself. Decided I didn’t want to chance Brown picking up a tail and beginning to wonder.”

“That’s probably right.”

A car pulled into the space ahead of them and an attractive blond lady in her mid-thirties got out and started back toward Willy’s window.

“She’s the PI that I got to look into Brown’s local banking,” Willy explained as she approached.

She handed him an envelope.

“More than you expected, Rakes. I’m so darned good, that sometimes I just can’t stand myself.”

She looked over at Masters. Willy made the introductions.

“Everybody calls me Collie as in woof, woof, but make the check payable to Colleen Carpenter. Got to get to my son’s baseball game. Call me on my cell if you have any questions or need anything else – just not during the next nine innings.”

Masters opened the envelope. It contained a series of date and time stamped photographs. Evan standing at a table in the bank. A close-up of Evan making out a check to Dutch Blond Enterprises for \$1,600.00 dollars. A second picture of Evan making out a check and a second close-up – to Business Front, Inc. for \$13,000.00.

“Seems he kept out \$1,400 for expenses,” Masters said after quickly calculating that sixteen Readings at \$1,000 each should total \$16,000. “I assume Laura and Chris get paid in cash.”

The checks were the no-name, account starters, and Brown had written in GHI Enterprises in the space at the top of each one. More pictures – all time and date stamped – showed the checks being inserted into stamped, pre-addressed envelopes and inserted into the mail box just outside the bank.

“How in the World?” Masters asked, shuffling back through the photos.

“All digital from her miniature camera – probably in her head band. Printed them out on a PC. She’ll save them to a CD, I’m sure, for safe keeping. I told you she was good. I guess that pretty well clinches that part of the scam, doesn’t it, “Willy said.

“Appears so but I want him for defrauding the public as well.”

“We keep drawing blanks on that, Sir.”

At that moment, Hans and Brenda left the diner and headed east away from the car, on their way to the trail.

“I’ll follow them on foot,” Masters said. “I don’t expect any trouble at this point, but we can’t be too cautious.”

Marks, the coffee drinker emerged and began following the couple.

“Call the other two and have them go right down to the house and find comfortable spots outside to spend the night.”

“I’m ridin’!” Willy responded somewhat esoterically.

Masters stepped out and closed the door. Willy drove on down the street. The youngsters both waved at him as he passed and he slowed to bend down and wave back. As they turned the corner at Willy’s shop, Hans hesitated for a moment and looked back up the street as if to make sure Masters was there. Not being an object easily missed, the old detective’s presence was verified in seconds.

With the sun at his back and a gentle breeze coming at him from the East, it promised to be a pleasant walk. There was something particularly precious about seeing Hans and Brenda walking hand in hand, eyes into eyes, talking and nodding in agreement about most everything, it seemed.

Masters was careful not to get too close – made less necessary by their giggling and unhushed chattering. Not until they neared the clearing with benches and trellises just behind the house did the talking cease. Five minutes passed in utter silence, and Masters felt the need to move forward just enough to make sure they were alright – alright seemed an understatement! Twenty minutes passed. It was ten before seven. Masters fully expected Jerry to charge onto the scene at seven saying, “My turn to play with Hans. Go home, now, girl!”

Instead, it was Hans’ slightly raised voice.

“Okay, Ray, ready to go inside now.”

That was followed by more giggling. More importantly, the adventure was successfully completed with all the principals safe and sound.

Inside, Hans explained that Brenda's mother was coming by at seven to pick her up. The two of them were off to one of those home parties that women seem to enjoy so much – plastic storage boxes or some such thing.

Hans escorted her out to the car, tripping over Jerry who, patiently waiting, had sprawled his five foot eight frame across the porch in front of the door. A sweet, quick peck on the lips and Hans galloped back to the house, flinging his body onto the still relaxed and unsuspecting Jerry as if going for the final pin in the WWF World Championship.

The boys were soon inside and upstairs, fully armed with chips, Twinkies and Ho Ho's!

Willy waited a few minutes and then rang the bell. He and Masters talked in the great room. Four off duty policemen were now on the schedule. Two at the house until six a.m., one at the motel from eight a.m. to six p.m. and one following Masters at those times Willy needed to be elsewhere.

Willy's next stop was to search the van but he wanted to drop off the grocery sack containing eight surveillance tapes from the two motel parking lots. He stayed just long enough to show Masters the highlights.

"The van leaves at 7:45 a.m. and returns at 5:05 p.m. on both of the past two days. Tapes one and two. The van enters the parking lot at Hans' motel at 7:55 a.m. and leaves at 5:00 p.m., again both days. Tapes three and four."

"It was the same yesterday," Willy continued. "Also, I saw it parked on the west side of the Church the night of the first program and behind it during the second. Does there seem to be some pattern, here?" he asked, tongue in cheek, and then went on to furnish the answer. "When Hans is doing Readings, that van has always been close by. I really need to get that look inside, now. It shouldn't take long."

Masters agreed and Willy left. The old detective took the opportunity to study the pictures Collie had provided. He shook them out onto the kitchen table, mindful that if the boys should appear he would need to get them out of view in a hurry.

In the bottom of the brown envelope was a smaller white envelope they had missed during the original examination. He opened it. There were five more pictures.

The first was Brown getting into the back seat of a late model car – the bank in the background – time stamped twenty seconds after the mailbox photo. There was a shot through the rear window showing the backs of three heads – two men and a woman. And one shot from each rear door window.

“Give Lassie an extra fatty bone! My! My! Evan, Laura, and Chris all in the same backseat.” The final photo showed the license plate – “Just as insurance,” Masters assumed out loud. “She is good! Very, very good!”

He put the photos back into the envelope and the envelope into the drawer of an end table for safe keeping. Then he listened again to the still mystifying, noise-garbled, tape recording that Willy had made of Hans’ second program in the community room of the church.

Masters pawed at his oversized mustache. He pulled at his ear lobes. He drummed the arm of the recliner with his big fingers. He drummed some more and then some more.

It was the “Hot Dignity” of all hot dignities!

He slapped the recliner with both hands and leaped (well!) to his feet.

“Willy, Willy, Willy! How did you, of all people miss this one?”

He removed the tape and put it into the envelope with the pictures. He now knew what Willy would be finding in the van. He understood the full nature of Hans’ operation. He was elated that he had solved the case. He was terribly worried about the young man who had come to mean so much to him during the short time they had known each other.

One thing remained to be demonstrated. It was for Masters the most crucial part of the case. He went to the kitchen and brewed up a pot of wonderfully aromatic, hot chocolate. Predictably, the boys soon appeared, tumbling over each other down the stairs and coming to a halt in a heap of arms and legs flailing to the beat of hysterical laughter. Who but fifteen year

olds could laugh their way through such pain?

By the time Masters had filled three mugs, set them on the kitchen table and taken a seat, himself, the two wet faced boys arrived, moaning and groaning. It seemed the hilarity stemmed from Han's sniffing the air upstairs and saying, "Hey! Chot Hocolate!" Masters laughed with them as they recalled – over and over again – every detail of the incident. Somehow it didn't grow old.

There was, for Masters, a more serious side to that evening brew. It was Masters' intention to get Hans to leave the table and get paper napkins for the three of them without being asked.

Masters did what he needed to do.

"How about some napkins, guys?" Hans said, getting up and retrieving an ample supply from the holder on the counter.

Masters managed a cheerless smile.

"You read my mind, Son," he said, fishing for just a bit more."

"Yes, I know." Hans answered seriously, and looking somewhat perplexed. "You've been a hard read. I suppose now that we are so comfortable with each other it's suddenly easier."

The conversation – mostly between the boys – continued as light and laughter-filled. Masters' heart was heavy and humorless. However, the chot hocolate was delicious!

CHAPTER EIGHT

Day five: Morning

There was a new face at the diner that Saturday morning. Jerry had brought his current girlfriend – Emily. The four were soon engaged in an all-consuming conversation.

Masters enjoyed both his own solitude at the back table and the frequent giggles, chuckles and belly laughs from the youngsters.

Willy arrived while Masters was deeply engrossed in reviewing and making notes. He took a seat. Masters flipped back in his pad and pointed at a passage, saying, “I assume that this is what you found in the Van.”

“Willy read the note.

“Yes, Sir. That’s it alright.”

Masters pointed out another passage and Willy read.

“How did I, of all people, miss that?”

Willy asked, exasperated with himself.

“I’ve found we often miss the obvious when we’re not looking for.”

Masters related the napkin story.

“Now I’m convinced Hans has no knowledge of the process or the scam,” Masters added.

“I understand.”

“Today’s the dangerous day, Willy. We have to move rapidly with warrants against the Inc. records and bank accounts and the personal assets of Evan Brown.

You can bet he'll know five minutes after they're served at the various institutions. We have to carefully protect the boy – and I mean carefully.”

It being Saturday, Hans only had Readings scheduled during the morning – the ‘overflow’ from the week past, as he termed them. That change in the daily routine required a modification in the protective plan.

“We need to hide him from twelve noon on, but without him knowing what we’re doing,” Masters said, thinking out loud. “I will also need time to sit down with him and explain what’s been going on.”

“I don’t envy you that job. The poor boy. I wish there was something I could do to ease his hurt,” Willy added, a pained look on his face as he shook his head slowly.

“First things first. We need Ellen’s help.”

“No problem. She’s very fond of Hans. She’ll do anything.”

“Okay. Set this up, then. Since Ellen’s house is smack in the middle of town and has that gorgeous, ten-foot hedge entirely surrounding the back yard – let’s have a cook out or some such thing for the kids – schedule it from 12:30 noon to 12:30 mid-night – a twelve-hour fun-a-thon.”

“A fun-a-thon. I can’t believe you said that, Sir.”

“Just listen. Don’t review. Place your guys close by. Maybe bring Lassie back.”

“That’s Collie, Sir,” Willy corrected with a smile.

Masters nodded a single nod.

“I want it tight. Under these circumstances, perhaps the sheriff will throw in with us.”

“I’m sure he will. He talks about the old days with you. Something about you solving a case down here while riding on a mule?”

“It was a very strong and determined mule,” Masters smiled.

Willy continued.

“I briefed him this morning, just to keep him in the loop – since we have been operating in his territory. I’ll take care of it.”

“Okay, then. I’ll set up the search warrants, synchronized for one p.m. Central Time. We’ll need an arrest

warrant for Brown, Bronson and Blau, but I don't want them served yet unless they try to flee."

"I'll see to that – Judge Gates is my uncle's brother in law. It's as good as done."

"Now, Willy, watch my astounding psychic powers at work! Shortly, Hans – probably with Jerry as moral support – will approach us with a wonderful idea about a 12-hour back yard party at Jerry's. I figure it will seem more believable if it comes from them."

Masters did what he needed to do and three minutes later there came Hans and Jerry, both slipping into chairs. Jerry, as it turned out, became the spokesman.

"We got this great idea about going over to my place this afternoon – the four of us – well, Hans really had the idea. We can grill, play badminton – volley ball – fill the old kid's pool and just hang out. Like a beach party in the back yard."

Hans remained silent as Jerry leveled his final volley. "Since old Hank, here ... "

Masters interrupted, "Hank?"

Jerry turned to Hans and put his arm on his shoulder. "Yeah. I sort of combined his two names. Every kid needs a nickname – Bren, Jer, Em, Raysir."

The boys giggled at Jerry's choice for the final example.

"It's impossible to just shorten Hans, thus, 'Hank' – part Hans and part Hanzik – well, very little Hanzik, actually."

For some reason that seemed hilarious to the boys.

Jerry seemed quite proud of himself and Hans beamed. Jerry continued.

"Well, since Hank, here's only going to be around a few more days it would be like our going away, skin party for him."

"A skin Party?" Masters asked with more than a slight question evident in his tone.

"Yeah. Water, sun, swimsuits, sun-block, skin, tan, girls. Surely you remember, Sir."

“Oh, yes, a skin party, certainly. Sounds like a good time to me. If it’s okay with Jerry’s Mom I see no reason not to go for it.”

“I don’t have a swim suit,” Hans said.

“Well, the more skin the merrier, I always say,” Jerry added with a giggle.

“Masters ceremoniously cleared his throat and looked at the two over the top of his glasses.”

“I got a bottom drawer full of suits,” Jerry said. Not a problem.”

Armed with the good news, Jerry returned to the girls. Hans lingered a moment.

“You’re sure this is really okay? I don’t want to put them in any danger.”

“We have learned that the culprits who have been setting up the accidents have been identified and are now under surveillance. No more need to worry, Son,” Masters said flashing a smile across the table while crossing his fingers beneath it.

“Really?” What a relief, Ray. Oh, my. I’ve been so worried for them, you know.”

He spun on his heel, fully rejuvenated, and returned to his friends.

“That’s one great kid, Sir. A lot of class for his age. It makes me wish I had a dozen just like him. Of course, they’d all have implants like his, so Pop could be in complete control.”

It was funny and, yet, it was terrifying.

Willy prepared to leave.

“You have the threat thing wrapped up, then?” he asked, having taken Masters at his word.

“There’s only one explanation, I think. Brown staged them. He made sure Hans was sent the proper protective message, transmitted from the nearby van each time. The reason he didn’t feel a message in the limo incident was because Blau, who sends the messages from the van, was driving the stolen car, instead, that night. Brown would blow the threats and accidents out of proportion and use them to tie up the local law enforcement officials. In that way, he immediately had them on his side and kept them distracted

from wondering about any fraud in his agenda. I'll tell you, Willy, this Brown is a brilliant operator."

"Why did he choose to use you instead of me, then?" Willy asked clearly puzzled as to how Masters' interpretation applied in this case.

"It was your masterful disguise, Willy."

"Disguise, Sir?"

"Yes. One of the finest cops I've ever had the privilege of working with, disguised as a hapless, TV repair man. Simply masterful! I'm sure Laura provided a complete report on you early on. Brown didn't see you as any threat so he didn't attach you to the operation in the usual way. That was a monstrous mistake on Mr. Brown's part. When he learned I was here – and over the years I seem to have developed some kind of reputation as a snoop – he immediately tried to sidetrack me by sucking me onto his team through Hans.

Willy nodded – some proud and some puzzled. He left to see Ellen. On his way out, he appeared several inches taller to the men at the coffee table who discussed it with some intensity. He appeared that way to himself, as well. 'Masterful!!!' A slight, though noticeable, swagger crept into his stride.

Masters and Hans were soon on their way to the Motel.

"I knew you'd say okay to the party, you know," Hans said as if needing to confess that he had read his old friend's mind.

"Oh?"

"Yeah. I'm quite sure it was your idea. It just suddenly washed over me like the napkin thing last night."

"Well, if you ever decide to become a detective, we could probably make a great team, then. Just make up your mind in a hurry, because I retired ten years ago."

It was good for a quiet laugh between them. Hans was riding high. At the motel, he changed and prepared himself for his morning of Readings."

'Little does he know,' Masters thought, as he watched the barefoot, charismatic young man cross the hall and disappear through the door, 'that this will be his final official performance as the Clairvoyant Kid.'

That morning the phone would again become Masters' link to the World.

"Jim. I need this yesterday and I'm quite serious. Adoption papers for the Hanzik boy to Evan Brown/Elliott Bronson about five or six years ago. Somewhere in New York State but most likely NYC. Any related info you can find – a visa for the boy, birth certificate – anything may be helpful."

"I got a very dependable gal in Court Services. If it's in the records, we should have it in minutes. Here's an interesting extra that one of my guys found – and I must say my men seem far more interested in working your case than any of their own right now. Beginning about two months after the Hanzik operation, Brown began setting up dozens of DBA (doing business as) firms here in New York State – mostly in the more rural counties. Crazy names like ABC Enterprises, ADE Enterprises and so on down a list of several dozen. They were established at ten to fourteen day intervals around the state."

Masters offered an explanation.

"If we'd cross reference them with the psychic's first tour, I imagine we'd find a 100% match with the tour dates and places. It's part of Brown's elaborate scam. He forms new companies – just like those – to pay the skim money, taken in cash, into Inc. That way, it appears that Inc performs services for a new company every couple of weeks then moves on to do the same for another. In the records, it keeps the company image looking above-board. For the record, could you fax that info to Rakes as time permits?"

"Sure, and oh, my granddaughter says to send you a big kiss. I'd deliver it now, but there are three eager young rookie cops watching my every move from the other side of the window – they just might not understand."

Masters chuckled as he hung up. A few minutes later it was Willy on the line.

"The party's a go! Four cops on each of two shifts. I figure I'll hang out up on the water tower a block west. I'll be

able to see the big picture from up there – until dark, at least – 8:30 or so. With a two-way radio and a cell phone I should be able to alert the crew to whatever seems to be going on.”

“Great,” Masters said.

Willy continued.

“Also, that Limo driver came to, and spilled his guts. It was just as you suspected. Brown gave him instructions to hit the ditch as soon as the other car flashed its lights. And the car that ran him down? The same description as the one Blau borrowed. He thinks he can ID the guy driving it. The driver’s under guard for his own protection.”

Masters changed the topic.

“We are going to need some temporary custody arrangements for Hans as of this afternoon – this evening at the latest.”

“Jacklyn at Children’s Services. I’ll take care of it. Do we have any legal documentation on Hans?”

“They are on their way to your fax – I hope.”

“Well, regardless, we can get a 48 hour, imminent danger protective, on him. That poor kid.”

“Need anything for the party?” Masters asked. “It’s on me and make it wonderful.”

“Well, as we speak, I am ankle deep in water. Jerry and I are about to get this old pool up and running. He says there is an old slip and slide in the garage. The net is up for the games. Ellen just brought out a supply of beach towels. You better come join us.”

“I seriously doubt if Jerry has a suit in that bottom drawer that would fit me.”

“He has a pup tent, Sir.”

Masters playfully slammed down the receiver in response to Willy’s humorous suggestion

“Of course, if that tent were in my color . . .” he pondered, momentarily.

A half hour passed, then, “Jim. What do you know?”

“I know every time you ask for help my department falls apart and the New York City court

system grinds to a halt.”

“What now?”

“Hanzik’s adoption. He was adopted here in New York State, alright, but not by the Brown/Bronson guy.”

“My goodness! Who then?” Masters was clearly puzzled.

“A new player – Mae Vargas. Application said she was thirty. In reality she was 80 and the resident of a county-run hospice upstate. Even though someone else – probably Laura – appeared as her before the judge, the DA tells me it will still be deemed legal considering the time that has elapsed and all. It makes the Hanzik kid a U S citizen any way you cut it.”

“And the Vargas woman?”

“Died of cancer three months later. Brown became the legal guardian, though that is up for grabs now because Brown/Bronson/ Whoever, doesn't seem to be a U S citizen himself. Interpol is searching that for us right now. He may have South African citizenship. Should we initiate guardianship up here or will Rakes take care of it there?”

“Rakes already has it covered.”

“I had no idea Arkies could move so fast.”

“You’d be surprised at what these Arkies can do, Jim. You’d love them! And as to moving fast, I can tell that you’ve never been chased across a meadow by a razorback!”

“Oh, almost forgot the check. The week Mae Vargas got the adoption, her son, Juan, received \$100,000 from Overseas Connection for services rendered.”

“Sorry about all the trouble I’ve caused your department, but thanks for your help, Jim. You guys are number one.”

“I have warrants on my desk ranging from racketeering to conspiracy to commit murder. I’m just waiting for your nod to serve them.”

“Twenty-four, maybe thirty-six hours at the most should have Brown and his conspirators where we want them.”

“Okay. Well, enjoy that Ozark hospitality, Ray, and keep one step ahead of those razorbacks.”

“Oh, I plan to. As a matter of fact, I’m invited to a skin party this very noon with a bevy of beautiful, less than legal

age, girls!”

There would be no explanation as he hung up before the question could be asked. Again, the big tummy rippled.

The next call was to Willy’s cell phone.

“Willy. I need you to set up a Joint Checking account for you and Hans as a minor. I’m not sure how that works in Arkansas.”

“I’ll need guardianship.”

“Do you mind?”

“Not at all. In fact, that was my suggestion to Jaclyn at Children’s Services.”

“You’re a good man, Willy Rakes. Do it, then. Then contact whomever you need to in Cloverdale – I think you struck up a friendship with a cop there – he can probably steer you in the right direction. As soon as you can, get a total of the balance on Hans’ account or accounts. His checking account number is on a check made out to me. You’ll find it on the dresser in my bed room – second door on the left, upstairs.”

“Entry code?”

“R A Y M.”

“Neither original nor safe, Sir.”

“But, at least this old, gray head can remember it.”

“I suppose there’s something to be said for that. I’ll tell you, Ray, Ellen’s making this into quite a party – everything but pony rides.”

“That sounds fine. Ellen doing okay?”

“She’s a real trooper. She’ll do just great. For some reason, I haven’t felt so close to her for – well maybe ever.”

“Focus, young man. Focus! By the way. With Jim’s help, we now know why we can’t find any past or current clients of Inc. Brown sets up temporary DBA’s as they travel – just like he did here - transfers the money as Lassie’s pictures demonstrated, and then abandons the local company when they move on.

“I figured as much, and, Sir, it’s Collie, remember.

“Collie, yes. I’ll try to remember that.”

“You better. I just made that the new entry code to Flint’s place.”

“You scoundrel!”

“Click!!!”

An hour passed.

“It pays to have a Judge as a once removed brother in law, Sir,” Willy began, calling from his car. “I got custody of Hans for 90 days and I set up the joint account. There are three Cloverdale accounts in Hans’ name. Only one is joint with Brown – that’s checking. So rather than send up a red flag by trying to remove Brown from that one, I set up our joint as a new account and then transferred most of the money into the new one. There is a savings account that Brown seems to be managing with forged signatures and a trust fund that was set up for Hans the very week Brown brought the boy to this country.”

“The savings account?” Masters asked, “Big?”

“Huge.”

“What about the trust fund?”

“Unbelievably humungous.”

“Put a hold of some kind on both it and the savings account. Is that possible?”

“My judge knows a judge who knows a judge who can take care of anything up there. At what time, shall I initiate the hold, Sir?”

“12:45 this noon. Indiana is also Central time, right?”

“From what I understand, Indiana communities seem to have minds of their own about that, Sir. I’ll see it’s done on Central Time, though. What reaction do you expect from Brown?”

“I expect him to put into motion some long ago established, well thought out plan to first, get rid of Hans and the evidence in the boy’s head and then to initiate a massive electronic funds transfer of all his accounts into the E O F account in the Cayman Islands.”

“Brilliant!” Willy answered. Protected all the way around. So, that’s why he did the E O F operation from down there. All in preparation for his escape, if that should ever become necessary.”

“Brown’s had years to plan all these final moves right down to the minutest detail. Our ace is to keep Hans out of his sight, in plain view, so to speak.”

“And so, the party in the middle of town where Brown would never look once he understands you have hidden him.”

“That’s the idea,” Masters said. “Brown’s ego is so large I’m sure he has been convinced I’ve merely been babysitting the boy just as he requested, and that he’ll have no idea that either Jerry or Brenda even exist. No one in or out of Ellen’s property after 12:30. I hope you put in a twelve-hour stock of junk food and soda!”

“Yes, Sir. You’ll see. I assume you’ll be inside.”

“That’s right. Unfortunately, for once in my life, Willy, I’m not very hungry.”

“I understand that, Sir. Me neither.”

“Stay sharp!”

“Yes, Sir.”

Masters hung up. Working with unknown help wasn’t his preference but he’d take Willy’s word on their skill and trustworthiness.

Masters was painfully aware that he still had no hard evidence connecting Brown to the deaths of Watson, Carey or Mann. Blau would have to be forced to give it all up.

Eleven thirty arrived. Masters called the Sheriff – an acquaintance of some years back.

“Sam, this is Ray Masters. I believe Officer Rakes has briefed you about my operation in and around Purdy Crossing.”

“Yes. How can I help?”

“I need your men who are watching Chris Blau to move against him, now!”

“I’m on the scene with them, myself, Ray. Willy said things were about to pop. They’ve filled me on the details.”

“Then you know what we’re looking for. Catch him in the act and get pictures. Make it all very quiet. Move him out in the van so as to not cause suspicion.

Hold him as per the arrangements – make him think it's on three counts of murder and name the victims. Say something about tying the weapons found at the site of Carey's boating accident directly to him through serial numbers and the fingerprints he left behind. Tell him the limo driver I.D.ed him. Tell him Raymond Masters says he has all the proof he needs – and I'll have more than enough once Blau turns on daddy."

"Daddy?"

"Evan Brown's apparently his father. He knows the old man well enough to believe, without any doubt, that daddy would blow his own son away in a minute if that's what it took to protect himself. I expect Blau to roll over easily. It would be helpful if it suddenly became difficult to find him in terms of making bail – say maybe a three-hour blackout."

"I've fished and hunted these hills since I was knee high to gopher. I'll tell you Ray, you just never know what might come up to delay a vehicle traveling these back roads on its way into town. Consider it done."

"Okay, then move! I'll stay on the line – Keep me advised of what's going on."

". . . My men are at the van . . . the door has been opened . . . they are inside and the door has been closed . . . the van is moving out of the parking lot . . . it is on the highway moving south. I'd say he's wrapped up."

"Thanks, old friend. Give your guys a bonus!"

"On you?"

"So far, this case is turning me into a pauper. How about I spring for their lunch, later?"

Masters anticipated that within the next few minutes several things would take place. Hans would have had his final Reading of the morning unexplainably interrupted at the moment Blau was taken into custody, so he would be returning to the room momentarily, bewildered about what had taken place.

Since that was the final Reading of the day, Brown – assuming he had been coordinating the operation via cell phone with Chris in the van – would not be immediately aware that Blau wasn't available. He would have no reason to contact him with information on any more clients for the day.

That should buy the time necessary to get Hans

changed and transported to Jerry's.

Hans entered the room frowning.

"So, have a good morning?" Masters asked paraphrasing his usual remark at such a time and attempting a cheerful demeanor."

"Well, yeah, right up to the end. I was finishing the last Reading and my mind just went blank. I've never had that happen before. I'll have to tell Mr. Brown to refund the lady's fee."

"You can take of that later. Now, let's get on with the party," Masters said feigning enthusiasm.

Hans perked up a bit and changed into jeans, a white T-shirt and tennis shoes.

"Since you're going to be around water, I figure you'll want to put a bandage on your neck," Masters said.

"Good thinking. I knew there must be some reason I keep you around."

He entered the bathroom smiling, and the deed was soon accomplished. Masters, of course was taking no risks. He wanted that device completely powerless in case Brown had something up his sleeve that utilized that system of communication.

"Let's take the back stairs," Masters suggested. "Brenda and her mom are picking us up. I told them to meet us out back. It's so much handier for my old legs."

Hans bought the reason without question. His mind was clearly elsewhere as they descended the steps.

"About that 'where-the-hands-can-be' rule, Ray. Jerry says it's just expected that dates rub sun screen and creams on each other at a swimming suit thing like this."

"I see. Yes. That rule would pose a problem then," Masters said doing his best to maintain his composure in light of the boy's serious take on the matter. "I suppose we will have to impose the Morris Code arrangement then."

"The Morris Code arrangement? Hans was

clearly puzzled.

“When I was your age there was a joke about the ultimate Bikini – the Morris Code Bikini.”

“I still don’t get it.”

“The garment was made up simply of two dots and a dash.”

“That’s really pretty funny.”

“Yes. Believe it or not we had a sense of humor even back in the dark ages.”

“Two dots and a dash. Wait ‘til I tell Jerry.”

Masters continued.

“Slow down. I haven’t got to the point of the story yet, Hans, my boy.”

“Oh, that’s right. The hands thing.”

“Here’s what you do. Assume that everything under those very large dots and that humongously wide dash are off limits and allow your hands to roam anywhere else – with the young lady’s permission, of course.”

“Hurray for the Morris Code!” Hans said most enthusiastically as they exited the stairwell onto the back, parking lot.

Hans greeted Brenda with a smile and a simple peck to her lips as he crawled into the back seat beside her. Masters called for a seat belt check and they were on their way.

Brenda’s mother was an attractive lady, talkative by nature, and friendly.

“Willy said to give you this cell phone in case he needed to call you this afternoon,” she said, pointing to a brown bag on the seat between them.

“Thank you. Willy seems to function on brown paper bags but he does think of everything.”

“Everything except how to get my sister, Ellen, to say ‘I do’.”

The woman was straight forward, he’d give her that.

“So, you’d like to see them together, would you?”

“They love each other. They share common interests. Willy is simply wonderful with Jerry - he’s a natural father and he obviously loves the boy. My sister is just so thick headed she can’t see the trees for the forest.”

“Trees for the forest?” Masters asked, thinking that was

backwards.

“Yes, out of all the men in World, she can’t see the one right in front of her nose that was meant for her.”

“Nothing like fixing up sayings to meet your immediate needs, I’ve always said,” Masters joked.

Hans and Brenda (aka Hank and Bren) cuddled in the back seat oblivious to the conversation. Once at Jerry’s, the young people ran ahead, up the porch steps and into the house.

“That Hans is just pure gold. He is the nicest, most gentlemanly boy I’ve ever met. And honest to a fault. He even told me about your father’s hands off rules and quite seriously stated that it was his intention to follow them when he was with my daughter. What a kid. Could I just rent him for about the next forty years?”

Masters smiled and nodded, assuming it had been rhetorical and that by nodding he had not committed himself to something he could not deliver. He thanked her for the ride and watched the car pull away.

His new phone rang and he scrambled to retrieve it from the sack.

“Hey! I - see - you.” Came Willy’s sing-songy greeting.

Masters turned to find the water tower. It did, indeed, command a full view of the entire little community.

“I assume you’re not skittish about heights,” Masters said.

“I’ll get back to on that. Everybody’s in place. I programmed your cell phone so you can easily get in touch with all of us.”

“Like this old gray matter is going to be able to remember phone numbers. I haven’t been able to remember my shoe size for the past thirty years.”

“This is a Masters Special, Sir. It’s a one button code. N is for north. S is for South. E is for east and W is for west. That’s the general location of the plain clothes guys.

“Clever. I can do that, as Hans would say. How about you up there in the clouds? W for Willy and W for Water tower seem to have been taken by W for west.”

“Then try C for Clouds.”

“How resourceful!”

“How scary that we came up with the same code word.”

“In that case, I’ll pretend it stands for ‘clown’.”

“One more thing – I say all quite intentionally ignoring the large detective’s last remark – I arranged it so all the calls from Flint’s phone will be forwarded to that cell phone in your hand, so you shouldn’t miss a one.”

“I appreciate all that, Willy. It’s ten seconds to zero hour, my friend. Warrants are about to be served. Accounts are about to be frozen. Let’s see how long it takes to get a response.”

“Masters scurried □ up the steps and into the house, locking the door behind him. He pulled the drapes across the front bay window and reassured Ellen that things were going to be fine.

“I believed that,” she said, “Right up until when you closed the curtains.”

The youngsters were already out back, bedecked in skimpy swimwear that most certainly was causing the author of that ‘hands placement rule’ to turn over in his grave and prompted his son to wonder if it were at all proper to actually look directly at any of the four.

As Masters stepped out onto the back deck, Hans approached him.

“Is this the greatest suit or what? Red, white and blue. Genuine swim team issue. Jerry’s a state freestyle champ and me, I can barely float. The girls have volunteered to help teach me. This is so great! Thanks. I hope you won’t be too bored through it all.”

The girls giggled.

“My teachers are calling,” Hans said beaming. “I must get back to them and be brave about this, now. Float! Float! Tummy up!”

He scurried (a true, most un-Masters-like scurry) across the yard. It reminded Masters of the nine-year-old that Hans had never had a chance to be. He watched the boy slip

himself under the water in the somewhat crowded, twelve-foot kid's pool with his three new friends. Before long it struck Masters that, quite clearly, he should have explained his father's rules to the girls, as well.

Masters looked at his big pocket watch, which, for the afternoon, was occupying the lower right pocket of his 'beautiful', orange, Hawaiian shirt. He headed for a chaise in the shade toward the back of the beautiful, big, fully enclosed, yard.

Ellen approached with a glass of something cool. She saw him admiring the hedge and trees.

"It's like a little island paradise back here, isn't it?" she said, announcing her presence.

"Ah, yes. Magnificent! Thank you, my dear." He accepted the drink and napkin.

"You plant this beautiful hedge yourself?"

"It was the first project my husband undertook after we moved in. Gerald was a very private person. He had plans for a pool someday."

"It must require a fair amount of care – what is it ten – twelve feet tall?"

"It does that. I don't know what I'd do without Willy. Actually, he's always taken care of it. Jerry's dad died before the hedge saw its second summer."

"Your lawn is also exquisite! I need to know your secret. Mine, back in Rossville, is a tangle of matted weeds. Green all summer but only pretty from a block away."

"Well, again, I'll have to refer you to Willy. He's the yard man. I guess he's the yard man, the plumber, the electrician, the roofer and the glass re-installer – there's lots of broken glass when you raise an active boy."

"Sounds like he should just take up residence in the garden house over there."

"You're not given to being subtle, are you, Mr. Masters?"

"It's Ray and no, I suppose not, apparently not even when I think I'm doing pretty well at it."

She laughed a wonderful laugh.

“I seem to be the only citizen of Purdy Crossing who isn’t absolutely convinced that Willy and I should join forces.”

“The usual phrase is get married, I believe,” Masters said, pushing his advantage.

“I know. I stay in an avoidance mode and it’s the dumbest thing anybody’s ever done.”

“Well, I didn’t mean to be playing Dear Abby.”

Suddenly, in deeper than he had intended, he moved on.

“The kids seem to get on very well, don’t they?”

“Oh, yes. Jerry talks about Hans from morning till night. I asked him this morning when they planned to announce their engagement. Then over at his Aunt’s place it’s the same thing from Brenda. And no, I didn’t ask the engagement question – I was afraid I’d be given a date.”

She laughed again. What a nice person, Masters thought. What a fine mother. What a lonely woman. He could understand Willy’s willingness to be patient.

Masters’ phone rang.

“Excuse me,” he said as he struggled to find the appropriate button to turn the contraption on. Then, presently, the familiar, “Masters here.”

“It’s Willy. Things okay?”

“Seem fine here. Anything happening in the outside world?”

“Nada! I’ll say one thing though, there’s a nice cool breeze up here and the sun has moved behind the tower so I’m finally sitting in the shade.”

Masters couldn’t resist: “How’s your lemonade?” He made some slurping noises. “Mine is absolutely delicious. Best of all I’m honored by the presence of a beautiful lady – unmarried I’m told.”

“Foul, Sir. Ten yards at least.”

“Anything from your guys?”

“Nothing.”

“Well, this is a day where no news is good news.”

“Willy out.”

The man is getting just a bit melodramatic, Masters thought to himself. Perhaps the sun hadn’t moved quite fast enough!

“Does it seem to you,” he said, stowing the phone and addressing Ellen, “that swimwear is getting – how shall I put it – skimpier every generation.”

“Sure does. It won’t be long until the girls are only wearing two dots and a dash.”

Masters did a double take.

“Hans shared that with us even before he said hello. I don’t know if you’re the kind of influence that young man needs in his life right now, Sir . . . er . . . Ray.”

“And how would you characterize that . . . thing . . . that Hans is almost wearing?”

“Ooo, La, La! Ray. Ooo, La, La!” she teased.

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CHAPTER NINE

Day Five: Afternoon

At two o'clock, Masters had burgers and hot dogs ready at the grill, and Ellen had opened an assortment of chips, Tostitos, and dips at the picnic table. There were also buns, catchup, mustard, hot sauce, pickles, potato salad, applesauce, fried chicken and watermelon iced down in an old metal laundry tub. It was a grand beginning to a marathon, eat-a-thon. The boys piled their plates high. The girls picked at this and that, apparently preferring to feed things to their guys, one tiny morsel after the other.

Kissing with full mouths did not rank high on Masters' list of wonderful things to watch, so he moved himself and his plate back to the chaise. Half way through Hans' first burger, Brenda decided to pull his hair back into a pony tail, holding it in place with a rubber band produced from Heaven only knew where. He looked very different that way. Masters couldn't hear the conversation but soon Brenda was removing the bandage – apparently, so as to not leave tan lines. Not at all what Masters had wanted but to say anything would not be appropriate. Why hadn't he had foresight enough to bring spares? This, having a child thing, was all quite new to him. He was suddenly thankful that the boy's first fifteen years had been someone else's responsibility.

At 3:10 the long-expected calls began coming in. The first was from New Mexico.

“Detective Masters. This is David Dix with the Attorney General’s office in Albuquerque. About five minutes ago, Evan Brown attempted to initiate a wire transfer of all his funds in the account we are watching to one in the Cayman Islands just as you had predicted. We had it sealed and now he knows that, of course. You said you wanted to be informed immediately.”

“Yes, Mr. Dix. Thank you. I’ll be in touch later.”

At 3:28 a similar call came in from Cloverdale – A Court Services employee, in that case.

“This is Jean Wells, Detective Masters, with the Putnam County Court Services in Cloverdale. Mr. Brown just attempted successive wire transfers from two accounts – checking and savings. They had been served and made unavailable. About ten minutes later, an attempt was made by phone, to transfer the entire trust fund to another bank – in New York City. He knows you’re onto him, Sir. Good luck.”

“Thanks for your help and good wishes. They will be needed.”

At 3:32 the sheriff called.

“Blau turned out to be just the pillar of Jello you expected he’d be. He’s implicated Brown in the three murders and more, some dating back twenty years. He just won’t stop talking. I’ve gone to feeding him just to get some relief. By the way, his cell phone has rung itself dead. The ID says it’s Evan Brown at the other end. We haven’t answered, of course. He’s bound to know something’s wrong.”

“Oh yes, Brown knows things are falling apart. Good going, Sam. I guess the confession makes bail irrelevant, then. Go ahead and escort him to his new eight by ten retirement home. I’ll pop for a new tin cup. On second thought, since he’s working so hard on our behalf, I’ll throw in a spoon, as well.”

Hans approached Masters.

“Brenda took off my bandage because . . . actually, I have no idea why she did it but it was great! Now, Jerry wants to get the slip and slide – whatever that is – going and says I’ll get things wet. Can Ellen drive us down to the house so I can pick up some spare bandages?”

“No Hans. I’m afraid that won’t be possible. I’ll bet

Ellen and the girls can fashion something for you out of odds and ends around here, though.”

It was a suddenly sober Hans.

“What gives, Ray? Something must be wrong. You said the bad guys were taken care of. What’s going on? I have the right to know.”

“Yes, you do. I just need you to trust me for a few more hours and I’ll tell you everything. Can you do that?”

“I don’t want to wait, I can tell you that. It puts a bumner on the party.”

“No. It must not do that. I really need you to keep this party going just like it has been. That’s the very best way you can help, right now. We can’t have any hysterical teenagers. I need you to take charge. Turn on your charm. Loosen up that grin. Help me here, Hans. Focus. Focus.”

“I’ll try, and of course I trust you. But you’ll let me in on things just as soon as you can?”

“You have my word.”

Hans started to leave but then turned back.

“By the way, where’s Willy. Nothing has happened to Willy, has it?”

“He’s fine. In fact, just between you and me, he’s watching you this very minute from up there on the water tower.”

Masters pointed. Hans shaded his eyes and took a look. He waved his left arm back and forth above his head. The man on the tower waved back, somewhat tentatively at first.

“You let me know now right away.”

“Yes. Right away, Son.”

The phone rang.

“What was that all about?” Willy asked.

“Hans sensed something was wrong and began asking questions, one of which was wanting to make sure you were safe.”

“What a kid! Okay. Still nothing here.”

“I need to keep my line open, Willy. Let me just say that Evan knows the jig is up and I expect him to try

something at any moment. Alert your guys. The sheriff has a very cooperative Christopher Allen Blau in custody, by the way. Masters out.”

“Now he has me doing it – Masters out – poppy-cock!”

Hans and Brenda went inside. Masters assumed that it was in search of something to use for a bandage. A few minutes later, Brenda returned alone with a fresh pitcher of lemonade and began talking with Emily as Jerry attached the hose to the plastic slide sheet.

Casually, Masters walked across the lawn to the house in search of Hans. Inside he called his name. Ellen heard and asked what was happening.

“I’ve just momentarily misplaced one blond Dutch boy. Perhaps he went in search of the bathroom. He needs another bandage for his neck.”

“Upstairs, first door on the right.”

“Look for him down here, will you, Ellen?”

Masters climbed the stairs.

The bathroom door was open and there was no sign of Hans. Masters looked through the other rooms. One was surely Jerry’s, clothes strewn here and there.

“Oh, Oh!” Masters said out loud.

There was a dripping swim suit on the door knob.

“Hans has dressed and left. Why, Hans? Why in the World would you leave at a time like this?”

Masters called Willy.

“Hans has dressed and left the house. I have no idea why. Couldn’t have been more than two minutes ago. Can you see him? “

“Negative on that. Let me call it in to the others. Tell you what. I’ll call North and South and you call East and West. It’ll speed things up.”

“Good plan.”

Masters went back down stairs and shared with Ellen what he suspected. He punched E as he went to the front door. It had been left ajar and unlocked. That was fully uncharacteristic of the boy. He might leave and risk himself, but he would never leave things open and risk the safety of his friends.

Masters delivered the message to the two policemen

and then turned to Ellen.

“Make up some excuse for why Hans and I had to leave. To get those bandages, perhaps. I’ll get back to you as soon as I know anything.”

“He’s in danger, isn’t he?”

“Yes. He is in danger. Lock this door. There will be a plain clothes cop come to the front porch. He won’t ask to come in. There will be another snooping around back by the hedge. Don’t let anybody in. I’ll call the sheriff for back up. Try to go on with the party for the kids’ sake. Be strong my dear.”

Ellen nodded and locked the door behind Masters.

“Willy, Masters here. See anything?”

“Nothing. If he’s on his way somewhere he’s good at this.”

“Unfortunately, he knows where you are so he’ll know to stay on the east side of things out of your view. Have the sheriff send a car for me - I’ll be walking east on Main - and have him blockade all the exit roads to this town.

“There are only two - County Road 170 North and County Road 170 South. I’m on it. Actually, I can see that good old Sam already has a car at each spot. I’ll put in the call now and alert them.”

Within minutes, Masters had been picked up. He was on the phone again with Willy.

“Do you have any way of picking up that tell-tale static, my boy?”

“Yes, actually and so do you. Tune the two-way in the squad car to the highest frequency then just play it back and forth on the dial and you’ll find it if it’s there.”

“I’m on it. Question two: Do you have any way of transmitting the Morse Code from up there?”

“I can rig it, Sir, but it will take a few minutes.”

“Here’s exactly what you are to transmit. ‘Jerry is hurt and needs you at once’. Got that?”

“Yes. What happened to Jerry?”

“Nothing. I just think that if Brown is sending him something to call him, we need the most powerful

message we can conjure up to get the boy back and I'm betting everything on that one."

"I agree. They have become like brothers. Let me get at it then."

"Deputy, let's do north and south sweeps along the streets and see if we can see the boy. It's not much of a plan but it's all I have."

The phone rang.

"Masters. This is Sheriff Sam. Did I mention that Blau said Brown carried a portable transmitter in that brief case of his? Seems like it's only good for about a mile – maybe slightly further."

"Thanks. Keep things bottled up."

"What about the old logging trail?" Sam asked.

"I didn't know it existed. Can it be traveled?"

"In some places. Easily on foot."

"Where did it come from all of a sudden?"

"It is great grandfather Purdy's logging trail. He used it to cross the hill to the North and take logs down to the creek over there."

"And so was born, Purdy Crossing, Masters said, mostly to himself. The boy we have to find once asked me about that."

Masters continued to fiddle with the dial.

"What's the deal about the Morse Code, if I may ask, Sir," said the deputy. "That's ancient history these days. Nobody learns it anymore."

"Here's the very short version," Masters began, as he continued moving the dial. "Five years ago the boy had a receiver implanted in his neck just under his left ear. It receives only code transmissions – the electronic dots and dashes. He was trained hypnotically to transcribe the messages without being aware of them. He was led to believe it was just the enhancement of his psychic power – his gift. Someone would feed him information in Morse code and he would repeat it, fully believing it was a result of clairvoyance. Now, I'm afraid, Evan Brown, who must destroy the mechanism inside the boy's head for his own protection, is luring him somewhere with a special message. Hans loves and trusts the man and he'll very likely do anything Brown

asks of him.”

“Wow. Luring him to his death, most likely,” the deputy surmised out loud.

“Most likely. Wait. I think I have it. I was pretty rusty at this until the other night when I figured I’d better brush up in a hurry. Let’s see, now.”

He listened for some time, jotting down letters on his pad. Finally, he spoke.

“This must be the message but it doesn’t appear to be very helpful. INITIATE SUGGESTION FINALE ONE. It just repeats those four words over and over.”

The phone rang.

“Did you catch it? INITIATE SUGGESTION FINALE ONE?”

“We got it. Any ideas?”

“Only that it’s coming from some automated source and Brown is most likely far away from it by now.”

“Finale! That sure doesn’t sound hopeful,” Masters said. “How are you coming with your project?”

“I’m beginning to transmit right now. I’ll gradually dial down until I’m coming in on the same wavelength. It may just cause a jumbled mess in the boy’s head.”

“I timed a four second interval between repeats. Can you get that message tapped out during that down time?”

“I’ll have to transmit quite a bit faster than he may be used to, assuming the speed of transmission on this message is typical.”

“Get to it! It’s all we have!”

Master hung up and within seconds heard the rapidly tapped out intervening message.

“Where, where, where?” Masters said out loud as he looked around from the car’s windows. He snapped his fingers. “To the motel, Deputy. Sirens, lights and all your whistles. GO! GO! GO!”

Within three minutes they were standing at the entrance. No sign of either Brown or Hans. They were met by another deputy.

“The car Mr. Brown has been using to go to and

from the bank in Ft. Smith is missing.”

“Not a good beginning. You have an APB out on it?”

“No, Sir.

“Then do it, Deputy. That car must not get onto the back roads. Anybody have a helicopter?”

“State Patrol, but nowhere close.”

“Do what you can. A boy’s life may be at stake. Scratch that – a boy’s life is definitely at stake!”

Masters and his driver went inside, took the elevator to the second floor and approached Evan’s room. With gun drawn, the Deputy entered, slowly, carefully. There was no one there. If Evan had departed, he had left most things behind. Not the briefcase, however.

“Are we looking for something in particular, Sir?” the deputy asked.

“I’m afraid it’s one of those ‘We’ll know it when we see it’ things.”

“Function, Sir? That might help.”

“That’s it! Good thinking my friend. Come. I think we’ll find our wayward waif in room 212.”

The door was standing wide open. They looked inside. Hans was there, reclined on the bed on his back. He had placed a vicious looking sawed off double barreled shotgun against his left ear. His fingers were on the dual triggers. The young man’s brow alternated between being peacefully relaxed and frantically furrowed - relaxed and furrowed.

“Now what?” the deputy asked in a whisper. Masters motioned him to stay put as he cautiously moved toward the bed. Hans seemed to be in a deep trance and completely oblivious to Masters’ presence. To remove the gun, even in the most rapid manner, would be too risky and yet it was impossible to know how soon the boy would act on his message and initiate suggestion finale one. It was clearly a post hypnotic suggestion, long dormant, waiting for the proper cue and for this final moment to arrive.

It was an ingenious plan. The boy, himself, would destroy the evidence by blowing it into eternity, while Evan was miles away. The devastating weapon had necessarily been kept loaded and hidden, but always available at that place where the boy had been trained to look. A quick survey

of the room suggested it had ridden along in the false bottom of one of Hans' trunks.

Masters reached out – his big hand within inches of the gun barrel. Hans began turning his head from side to side and groaning as if in the worst possible agony. The furrowing of his brow deepened. Such motion could easily discharge the gun. Tears began streaming down the boy's cheeks.

Just as Masters decided it was now or never time, Hans moved the gun away from his head and onto the bed beside him. Masters quickly removed it from the boy's grasp and handed it to the deputy.

Masters took Hans hand in his and began stroking it.

"Hans, this is your friend, Ray. Listen to me now. I need you to wake up from your bad dream. Things are going to be fine."

Hans' lips quivered into motion. His head twisted from side to side. His words were whispered.

"I can't come now. My friend needs me."

The phrase was repeated with greater and greater intensity. Then, the boy fell silent – sobbing.

The deputy had a suggestion.

"In the movies they snap their fingers . . . , Sir."

Masters shrugged his shoulders and snapped his fingers. Hans opened his eyes and looked at Masters. Masters nodded at the deputy and then turned to Hans who began talking, excitedly.

"Jerry, we have to get to Jerry."

"Jerry is fine," Masters said in the calmest, most soothing tone he could muster. "Believe me. I know that Jerry is all right. You were having a very bad dream. Everything is fine now, okay?"

Of course, everything was not fine, but that wasn't the moment to provide the details. Masters brushed the young man's tear dampened hair back from his eyes.

Hans struggled into a sitting position on the edge of the bed, tears still rolling down his face – his chest heaving. Masters furnished a handkerchief and sat

beside him, drawing his arm tightly around Hans' waist.

"What in the hell just happened to me?" he sobbed. "One minute I'm at Jerry's and the next I'm here scared out of my balls. What's going on?"

Masters motioned the deputy to leave them alone. "Make the necessary calls for me, okay," he said as the man left, nodding that he understood. He had placed the gun on the dresser along with the two shells, which he had removed from it.

"That gun!" Hans said, noticing it for the first time. "It's like the one Dr. Watson used to let me play with."

The last pieces of the puzzle began to find their way home.

Masters got Hans a pop from the little refrigerator and then began laying out the full, unpleasant, life altering story.

He told of how Hans had been selected by Mr. Brown because of his special kind of hearing loss, because he was fluent in English, and because he was totally alone in the world. The fact that he had been known to 'feel things about others,' was strictly an unexpected extra, though it may have swayed Evan's decision among the several children who fit his plan.

Hans learned how doctor Watson – a World renowned hypnotherapist – was instructed by Brown and paid handsomely, to cure the boy's deafness, make his hearing reappear after the operation in response to Brown's message of 'love', and to implant the self-destruct, post-hypnotic suggestion that he had just experienced. Allowing him, as a ten-year-old boy, to become familiar and comfortable with the weapon and to play with it as though it were a harmless toy was all part of the pre-conditioning necessary to assure the finale would be successful were it ever needed.

The mind-clearing exercises were actually training sessions in which Hans learned the Morse Code and was taught to remain oblivious to it in his conscious mind. To make sure Watson never spoke of it, he had been killed.

Dr. Carey was likewise paid a large sum to assist Dr. Mann, from the Primate Neurological Experimentation Lab, with the implanting of the receiver and power source. They, too, were both then silenced.

Masters described the role of Laura as the data gatherer from the unsuspecting local populations and Chris, who, with the help of his specially equipped van, delivered the coded messages based on Laura's information.

"Why a Van, Ray? Why not just use a transmitter down the hall somewhere?" Hans asked, quietly, struggling to take it all in.

"Separation. The van had no local connection with the tour. It could park anywhere you were and the operation could be undertaken without raising suspicion. Its large transmitter was powerful and could be made directional to contain the signal, thereby helping to protect it from detection. Fortunately for us, Blau had to transmit right through your motel room – where I was sitting – and I picked it up as static on the phone. Same sort of thing at your second performance. Blau parked the van behind the church so the signals traveled directly into the parabolic mike Willy had set up across the street. Although I cannot be completely sure until it's examined, it appears that the transmitter in the briefcase may have been programmed only to transmit the automated 'finale' message."

Hans nodded that he understood. Masters continued, explaining the banking and money laundering practices.

"Evan used the E O F as a legitimate operation to validate the psychic tour and contribution gathering. He siphoned off nine tenths of the receipts to his New Mexico Corporation, Business Front, Inc. which also appeared legitimate and showed no ties to you, Hans, the tour, or E O F.

"With a variety of carefully selected investments, Inc. took large, legal tax deductions and then paid the appropriate taxes which were due on the remainder – again to give the appearance of total propriety. The result was a huge yearly take running well beyond four million dollars."

Hans had a question about his trust fund.

“If that was set up with the money we stole from my clients, I can’t accept it, of course.”

“I think there may be an interesting twist there. We will have to wait and let the legal eagles work it out.”

Hans had still another question.

“If I am not psychic, how did I read your mind about the napkins and the party? Those things don’t seem to fit.”

Masters took out his pen and began tapping on the bedside table. The answer was in the message – “I tapped with my pen on the table just loud enough for you to hear but soft enough to keep it from being obvious.”

Hans nodded and even managed a slight smile.

Masters phone rang.

“Excuse me, Hans.”

It was the sheriff.

“It’s a good news, bad news thing, Ray. We have Brown in custody along with his briefcase. It was still transmitting when we seized it.”

“And,” Masters asked, assuming that had been the good news.”

A deputy also found Laura Bronson in her motel room, dead by strangulation. Had to have been Brown. There’s nobody else left. Willy mentioned that she was his daughter. That bastard had to look her right in her face while he killed her.”

“And now we know the truly dark nature of the beast.”

“I have a handful of deputies that I think would be pleased to save you the trouble of a trial.”

“But deep, down, inside their hearts, they’re not Evan Browns, so the trial will go on.”

Masters hung up and turned his attention back to Hans, who began speaking.

“So, I’ve been a fraud all my life. I feel empty, you know, Ray. I feel like there is no me left. That fraud is what I believed I was. But now . . . tell me again about what just happened. It’s like it’s taken a while for my mind to clear.”

Masters again presented his theory about the “Finale” post-hypnotic suggestion. Hans shook his head in disbelief.

“He programmed me to destroy the evidence and myself in the process, in order to protect himself. I just can’t

believe Mr. Brown would have done such things – I mean I can now but ...”

His lower lip quivered and the tears began again. He leaned himself into Masters chest.

“I love that man so much. I owe him everything, you know? Is it wrong to still love him, Ray?”

Masters sat silently, formulating his response and slowly rubbing his dear young friend’s back, as Hans sobbed his way through the overwhelming sadness and disillusionment. At last, the boy eased away with a sigh, and sat there, shoulders slumped and hands folded in his lap. Masters looked him in his eyes.

“Let me underscore for you something that you seem to have missed through all of this, Son. Even while under the most powerful kind of mind-altering, will-shattering hypnotic suggestion – while in the depths of a well-practiced, all-consuming, trans state – your love for Jerry was so powerful, that you were able to reclaim control of your mind and save yourself in order to attend to the needs of your friend. Perhaps that is your true ‘gift’, my boy – the magnificent power of your unfaltering love. No, Hans. How can it ever be wrong to love?”

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Epilogue

Flint here. As I mentioned at the outset, a year has come and gone since this story played out amid the people on this Arkansas hill known as Purdy Crossing. I gave up trying to reprogram my entry code and am now resigned to the fact that I either punch in the letters c-o-l-l-i-e or remain outside on my porch forever.

Masters returned to his home in Rossville, New York, with renewed determination to grow actual grass in his lawn.

Evan Brown (whose actual name turned out to be Ivan Ipslip from South Africa) and Chris Blau are spending the rest of their days making license plates in prison.

A judge determined that since the trust fund had been established prior to the beginning of the psychic scam, the money was legally Hans' to keep and use as he saw fit.

Last August, Willy and Hans made it official – Father and Son.

In September, Willy and Ellen made it official – Husband and Wife. . .which allowed Hans and Jerry to make it official – Brother and Brother – tussling, roughhousing, giggling into the night, brother and brother.

Hans and Brenda officially began going steady in October.

In November, after long and careful consideration, Hans officially added a middle name –

Raymond.

Jerry, Emily, Hans and Brenda formed a band - *Jeremhanda*. Apparently, Hans had another undiscovered gift – his beautiful singing voice. As the hallmark of each performance, Jerry goes into the audience, has folks write the name of their favorite song on a card and Hans astonishes their fans by telling them what was written. (Willy fashioned a fountain pen size code transmitter.) They're making quite a name for themselves locally and of course have big plans for the years to come.

Regardless of what his future in music may bring, here in Purdy Crossing, Hans Hanzik will always be remembered as The Clairvoyant Kid.