

## The Devil's Jackpot

*Beatrice Hayes  
Metaphysician  
Astrological Charts - Channeling  
Tarot Readings a Specialty*

James Gore stared at the card in the health shop window. He went in — but not before glancing furtively to right and left. It would not do for an attorney, who advised companies on their financial affairs, to be seen consulting a fortune teller.

He paid the consultation fee of R250 at the counter before being directed to a red velvet-curtained archway half hidden by a display stand of sun-dried organic tomatoes.

The windowless interior was lit by a single dim red lamp.

"You're a punctual man Mr Gore. Please sit down." The owner of the voice emerged from behind another curtain as he sat down at a small table. She was wearing a purple robe with a gold-embroidered mandarin collar. A matching headband circled her jet black hair. Behind her, a stream of incense smoke formed a halo round the red lamp. A bit theatrical he thought. But what else had he expected? It was all a load of nonsense. He had only come at the nagging insistence of his mother — a regular devotee of the fortune teller.

"She's simply amazing, James. Why don't you go and see her for a reading? See if she can shed light on your little problem. James's 'little problem' was that, after trying for over two years, he had been unable to get his wife pregnant.

The woman sat down opposite James, her head down as she squared up the pack of cards that lay waiting on the table. When she looked up his scepticism took a jolt. The eyes were totally unexpected. Black as night, they seemed to pierce into his soul. Nothing theatrical about *them*. An icy finger of unnamed dread slid between his shoulder blades as she stared at him, unblinking, for perhaps twenty seconds. She turned over the first card and spoke

"My friends call me Beetie. May I call you James?"

"Of course," he said as she continued turning the cards. At the fifth card she stopped. "I see someone called Susan. Do you know a Susan?"

"No, I don't," he replied. Then he frowned. That Wetherbridge woman, the new magistrate, wasn't she a Susan? "Sorry," he said. "I do know a Susan."

"You'll be getting a communication from her." She pursed her lips, frowning. "Something you won't like."

She turned over three more cards. "I recall from your phone call that you were borne on April 25. Would you call yourself a typical Taurus?"

"What is a typical Taurus?" he asked.

"Well, would you say you had a short fuse?"

"I believe I have."

"What side of your family would that come from?"

"My father, actually. His sharp tongue often got him on the wrong side of a judge."

The conversation continued along these lines for perhaps ten minutes before James realised he was being pumped. He placed his hands flat on the table.

"Look," he said. "I am not impressed. I know exactly what you are doing. In your profession I believe it is known as 'cold reading'. And as for you seeing a Susan in my life,

you were on to a safe bet. I guess almost everybody knows a Susan.” He stood up to leave.

“Don’t be angry, my dear,” she said. If you’ll just listen, I’ll give you two solid predictions that will make you eat your words.”

James paused.

“The first is that the third number in this week’s lotto will be your age. The second is that your wife is pregnant.”

James stared at her open mouthed. How could she have known about. but, of course, his mother must have said something. He thrust the curtain roughly aside on his way out. For the rest of that week his encounter with Beatie was forgotten as he wrestled with a big case in the Supreme Court.

On the Saturday morning James was watching cricket on TV. He heard his wife’s car draw up. A moment later she burst into the room, with tears of joy in her eyes.

“Fantastic news, darling. I’ve just come from the doctor and guess what? I missed my period last month and now he’s confirmed it. We’re going to have a baby.” She flung herself into his arms. As they clung to each other the thirty-eight-year-old James could see the TV screen over her shoulder.

The cricketers were having drinks. Across the bottom of the screen the winning lotto numbers were displayed in a row. The third number was thirty-eight.

A week later James was again sitting opposite Beatrice Hayes.

“I owe you an apology,” he said humbly. “Look, I’ve been thinking. Suppose I doubled or even trebled your fee could you perhaps give me a tip I could make use of?”

Once more the eyes impaled him. Uncomfortably he sensed a gleam of triumph in their depths.

“How would you like to win the jackpot?” she said.

James stared at her. He knew the jackpot had run over for four weeks and was standing at a record six million. “Are you serious?”

“I can give you the last number.” she paused, “and the names of five people who have the remaining numbers.”

James’s quick legal brain saw the possibilities immediately.

“How much do you want,” he asked.

“No money, my dear, just a lock of your hair.”

His every instinct told him to get out there and then. But greed got the better of fear and he sat with eyes tight shut as he felt her scissors snipping behind his right ear. He opened his eyes to see her secure the lock of dark brown hair with an elastic band and pop it into a small silver box. Before she closed the lid he caught a glimpse of several other locks of hair. What the hell was he getting into?

“Now I’m going to give you your number,” she said. She reached across and clasped his left hand between both of hers so that her palm was pressed tightly against his.

“Close your eyes and listen carefully. If you disclose this number or even mention its existence to anyone other than the five names I will be giving you, your plans will fail. And if you ever mention what has taken place here today to anyone whatsoever you will be struck down by a catastrophic personal tragedy. Do you understand?”

“I do,” he replied.

She released his hand. “Look at your palm.”

In the dim light he could just make out a number: 42. Later, in daylight, he would see that it was formed of whitish scar tissue like a long-healed burn.

Beetie opened a drawer in the table and extracted a small sheet of white paper. She placed it in front of him. There was a list of five names, each with a telephone number.

"Now listen carefully," she said. "These five people each have a lotto number. They are unknown to each other but they are expecting phone call. That will come from you. They have been sworn to secrecy. The correct order for the numbers is the same as that of the names on the list. So make sure you don't lose it.

James folded the paper in half and tucked into an inside pocket. He started to mumble his thanks, but she cut him short.

"There's no need to thank me," she said.

"But what's in it for you, Beetie? Why aren't you the richest woman in the world?"

She fingered her gold necklace and smiled a sly little smile. "My dear, I have other satisfactions." James noticed that the pendant was a tiny upside-down crucifix.

His first act on returning home was to make a copy of the list and hide it between the pages of his Webster's Dictionary. He sat down at the telephone with the list before him. There were four women and one man on the list. The man was Johann Scholtz — the owner of a small vegetable farm. There was Myrna van Tromp a retired widow; Jill Barker an estate agent; Millicent Premm a teacher; and Hetta Saayman, a nurse. His proposal to all of them was the same: to enter the competition as a syndicate in which they would all have an equal share.

"If everyone agrees I will draw up a formal document — I *am* an attorney by the way — which will be signed by all of us and which will protect our individual interests. Of course we will keep our numbers to ourselves until we finally assemble at a Lotto station to submit the entry form."

He had learned from the farmer, Johann Scholtz, that his smallholding was on an isolated site a kilometer from the highway — and that he lived with his elderly mother who was deaf. He phoned the farmer back.

"It seems to me, Johann, that that your house would be an ideal place to meet and set up the syndicate. We'd be sure of privacy.

Johann Scholtz agreed. They settled for 10 pm when his mother would be asleep.

Two nights later five cars followed their headlights down the rutted track that led to the Scholtz smallholding. By ten fifteen they were all sitting round a big yellowwood table in the dining room. James noted with amusement that they were all wearing gloves. James had simply stuck a plaster across his palm. Nobody was taking any chances at this stage of the game. James had no trouble in asserting his leadership as he stood up to address the group. To break the ice, he suggested they start by giving a name to the syndicate. The little silver-haired widow, Myrna van Tromp, came up with the most popular idea.

"Let's call it 'Beetie's Choice,'" she had suggested.

"Beetie's Choice it is," said James. "Now, my friends, let's get down to the serious business of the evening." He opened his briefcase and produced a sheaf of papers.

"Please pass these around so that every one has a copy," he said to the rather severe Millicent Primm. "Now this is a simple agreement to form a syndicate in which we will all be entitled to an equal share of the winnings. Read it carefully and, if you find it acceptable, sign and pass it to the person on your right and so on until we each have a fully signed copy."

When they had each signed James announced: "As a further safeguard I suggest we all sign an extra copy which we will seal and hand to my bank manager for safekeeping."

He reached into his briefcase and produced, not the expected document, but a nine

millimeter automatic pistol fitted with a silencer.

He worked his way round the table — scoring with clean shots to four of the heads. He was quick but not quick enough to catch the petite estate agent, Jill Barker before she dived under the table. He got to his feet and walked round to where she lay, whimpering, in the foetal position. He put two bullets through the back of her head. A low moan came from Johann Scholtz who was slumped over the table in a pool of blood. James snapped a fresh magazine into place and finished him off with a single shot to the temple. Methodically he walked round the table removing the left glove from each of the bodies. He took a notebook out of his pocket and, using Millicent Primm's expensive gold pen, wrote down the numbers scarred into the dead palms. He collected the blood-spattered papers, put them into a plastic envelope and returned them to his briefcase. On his way out he stopped to wipe some blood from his shoes with a chair cushion. He saw no one as he drove back down the dark track and onto the highway.

Detective Chief Inspector Visagie tried to concentrate on his breakfast and the Sunday newspaper which he had propped up against the milk jug. It was no good. He was still smarting at the chief Constable's reprimand for his lack of progress in the farm murders case. It was now three months since the murders had made international headlines. He was totally baffled. Why the gloves? Why the numbers burned into the hands? A quarrel between members of some Mafia-like conspiracy seemed the only explanation. But thousands of hours put in by the investigators had failed to reveal the slightest link between the victims.

He speared a piece of bacon as he gazed with scant interest at the newspaper. Then he noticed a row of circled numbers boldly displayed across the bottom of the page. Abruptly the forkful of bacon came to a halt halfway to his mouth — where it remained for the next fifteen seconds as he stared at the numbers. It was worth a shot. He reached for his cellphone.

"Sergeant," he barked. "I want you to get me the winning numbers of the lotto for the past twelve weeks — and the names of the major winners. Yes, I know it's Sunday. Just get onto it and get straight back to me."

An hour later the phone rang. As the Chief Inspector listened his face lit up in an unholy grin. "Bingo," he yelled.

"Are you Mr James Gore?" asked Detective Sergeant Mwezi.

It was 5am the following morning. James stood in a blue velvet dressing gown at the door of his ostentatious new Bishops court residence confronted by four plain-clothes policemen. He swallowed hard and nodded.

"I have a warrant to search these premises."

James stood back to let them in. The sergeant deployed his men to various parts of the house. "Van Wyk, you can start with that bookcase."

James looked in horror at the red Websters dictionary standing out like a beacon on the middle shelf. How, in the name of God, could he have forgotten that spare list?

"May I see that warrant again, Sergeant," he asked desperately. But his hope of spotting an irregularity was in vain. The document was correctly drawn up and signed by a magistrate.

Her name was Susan Weatherbridge.

**Anonymous**