



**M**Y NAME IS Stephen Leeds, and I am perfectly sane. My hallucinations, however, are all quite mad.

The gunshots coming from J.C.'s room popped like firecrackers. Grumbling to myself, I grabbed the earmuffs hanging outside his door – I'd learned to keep them there – and pushed my way in. J.C. wore his own earmuffs, his handgun raised in two hands, sighting at a picture of Osama bin Laden on the wall.

Beethoven was playing. Very loudly.

'I was trying to have a conversation!' I yelled.

J.C. didn't hear me. He emptied a clip into bin Laden's face, punching an assortment of holes through the wall in the process. I didn't dare get close. He might accidentally shoot me if I surprised him.

I didn't know what would happen if one of my hallucinations shot me. How would my mind interpret that? Undoubtedly, there were a dozen psychologists who'd want to write a paper on it. I wasn't inclined to give them the opportunity.

'J.C.!' I screamed as he stopped to reload.

He glanced toward me, then grinned, taking off his earmuffs. Any grin from J.C. looks half like a scowl, but I'd long ago learned to stop being intimidated by him.

‘Eh, skinny,’ he said, holding up the handgun. ‘Care to fire off a clip or two? You could use the practice.’

I took the gun from him. ‘We had a shooting range installed in the mansion for a purpose, J.C. *Use it.*’

‘Terrorists don’t usually find me in a shooting range. Well, it did happen that once. Pure coincidence.’

I sighed, taking the remote from the end table, then turning down the music. J.C. reached out, pointing the tip of the gun up in the air, then moving my finger off the trigger. ‘Safety first, kid.’

‘It’s an imaginary gun anyway,’ I said, handing it back to him.

‘Yeah, sure.’

J.C. doesn’t believe that he’s a hallucination, which is unusual. Most of them accept it, to one extent or another. Not J.C. Big without being bulky, square-faced but not distinctive, he had the eyes of a killer. Or so he claimed. Perhaps he kept them in his pocket.

He slapped a new clip into the gun, then eyed the picture of bin Laden.

‘Don’t,’ I warned.

‘But—’

‘He’s dead anyway. They got him ages ago.’

‘That’s a story we told the public, skinny.’ J.C. holstered the gun. ‘I’d explain, but you don’t have clearance.’

‘Stephen?’ a voice came from the doorway.

I turned. Tobias is another hallucination – or ‘aspect,’ as I sometimes call them. Lanky and ebony-skinned, he had dark freckles on his age-wrinkled cheeks. He kept his greying hair very short, and wore a loose, informal business suit with no necktie.

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'I was merely wondering,' Tobias said, 'how long you intend to keep that poor man waiting.'

'Until he leaves,' I said, joining Tobias in the hallway. The two of us began walking away from J.C.'s room.

'He was very polite, Stephen,' Tobias said.

Behind us, J.C. started shooting again. I groaned.

'I'll go speak to J.C.,' Tobias said in a soothing voice. 'He's just trying to keep up his skills. He wants to be of use to you.'

'Fine, whatever.' I left Tobias and rounded a corner in the lush mansion. I had forty-seven rooms. They were nearly all filled. At the end of the hallway, I entered a small room decorated with a Persian rug and wood panels. I threw myself down on the black leather couch in the center.

Ivy sat at her chair beside the couch. 'You intend to continue through *that*?' she asked over the sound of the gunshots.

'Tobias is going to speak to him.'

'I see,' Ivy said, making a notation on her notepad. She wore a dark business suit, with slacks and a jacket. Her blonde hair was up in a bun. She was in her early forties, and was one of the aspects I'd had the longest.

'How does it make you feel,' she said, 'that your projections are beginning to disobey you?'

'Most do obey me,' I said defensively. 'J.C. has *never* paid attention to what I tell him. That hasn't changed.'

'You deny that it's getting worse?'

I didn't say anything.

She made a notation.

'You turned away another petitioner, didn't you?' Ivy asked. 'They come to you for help.'

'I'm busy.'

'Doing what? Listening to gunshots? Going more mad?'

'I'm *not* going more mad,' I said. 'I've stabilized. I'm practically normal. Even my non-hallucinatory psychiatrist acknowledges that.'

Ivy said nothing. In the distance, the gunshots finally stopped, and I sighed in relief, raising my fingers to my temples. 'The formal definition of insanity,' I said, 'is actually quite fluid. Two people can have the exact same condition, with the exact same severity, but one can be considered *sane* by the official standards while the other is considered *insane*. You cross the line into insanity when your mental state stops you from being able to function, from being able to have a normal life. By those standards, I'm not the least bit insane.'

'You call this a normal life?' she asked.

'It works well enough.' I glanced to the side. Ivy had covered up the wastebasket with a clipboard, as usual.

Tobias entered a few moments later. 'That petitioner is still there, Stephen.'

'What?' Ivy said, giving me a glare. 'You're making the poor man wait? It's been *four hours*.'

'All right, fine!' I leaped off the couch. 'I'll send him away.' I strode out of the room and down the steps to the ground floor, into the grand entryway.

Wilson, my butler – who is a real person, not a hallucination – stood outside the closed door to the sitting room. He looked over his bifocals at me.

'You too?' I asked.

'Four hours, master?'

'I had to get myself under control, Wilson.'

'You like to use that excuse, Master Leeds. One wonders if moments like this are a matter of laziness more than control.'

'You're not paid to wonder things like that,' I said.

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He raised an eyebrow, and I felt ashamed. Wilson didn't deserve snappishness; he was an excellent servant, and an excellent person. It wasn't easy to find house staff willing to put up with my ... particularities.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I've been feeling a little worn down lately.'

'I will fetch you some lemonade, Master Leeds,' he said. 'For ...'

'Three of us,' I said, nodding to Tobias and Ivy – who, of course, Wilson couldn't see. 'Plus the petitioner.'

'No ice in mine, please,' Tobias said.

'I'll have a glass of water instead,' Ivy added.

'No ice for Tobias,' I said, absently pushing open the door. 'Water for Ivy.'

Wilson nodded, off to do as requested. He *was* a good butler. Without him, I think I'd go insane.

A young man in a polo shirt and slacks waited in the sitting room. He leaped up from one of the chairs. 'Master Legion?'

I winced at the nickname. That had been chosen by a particularly gifted psychologist. Gifted in dramatics, that is. Not really so much in the psychology department.

'Call me Stephen,' I said, holding the door for Ivy and Tobias. 'What can we do for you?'

'We?' the boy asked.

'Figure of speech,' I said, walking into the room and taking one of the chairs across from the young man.

'I ... uh ... I hear you help people, when nobody else will.' The boy swallowed. 'I brought two thousand. Cash.' He tossed an envelope with my name and address on it onto the table.

'That'll buy you a consultation,' I said, opening it and doing a quick count.

Tobias gave me a look. He hates it when I charge people,

but you don't get a mansion with enough rooms to hold all your hallucinations by working for free. Besides, judging from his clothing, this kid could afford it.

'What's the problem?' I asked.

'My fiancée,' the young man said, taking something out of his pocket. 'She's been cheating on me.'

'My condolences,' I said. 'But we're *not* private investigators. We don't do surveillance.'

Ivy walked through the room, not sitting down. She strolled around the young man's chair, inspecting him.

'I know,' the boy said quickly. 'I just . . . well, she's vanished, you see.'

Tobias perked up. He likes a good mystery.

'He's not telling us everything,' Ivy said, arms folded, one finger tapping her other arm.

'You sure?' I asked.

'Oh, yes,' the boy said, assuming I'd spoken to him. 'She's gone, though she did leave this note.' He unfolded it and set it on the table. 'The really strange thing is, I think there might be some kind of cipher to it. Look at these words. They don't make sense.'

I picked up the paper, scanning the words he indicated. They were on the back of the sheet, scrawled quickly, like a list of notes. The same paper had later been used as a farewell letter from the fiancée. I showed it to Tobias.

'That's Plato,' he said, pointing to the notes on the back. 'Each is a quote from the *Phaedrus*. Ah, Plato. Remarkable man, you know. Few people are aware that he was actually a *slave* at one point, sold on the market by a tyrant who disagreed with his politics – that and the turning of the tyrant's brother into a disciple. Fortunately, Plato was purchased by

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someone familiar with his work, an admirer you might say, who freed him. It does pay to have loving fans, even in ancient Greece ...'

Tobias continued on. He had a deep, comforting voice, which I liked to listen to. I examined the note, then looked up at Ivy, who shrugged.

The door opened, and Wilson entered with the lemonade and Ivy's water. I noticed J.C. standing outside, his gun out as he peeked into the room and inspected the young man. J.C.'s eyes narrowed.

'Wilson,' I said, taking my lemonade, 'would you kindly send for Audrey?'

'Certainly, master,' the butler said. I knew, somewhere deep within, that he had not *really* brought cups for Ivy and Tobias, though he made an act of handing something to the empty chairs. My mind filled in the rest, imagining drinks, imagining Ivy strolling over to pluck hers from Wilson's hand as he tried to give it to where he thought she was sitting. She smiled at him fondly.

Wilson left.

'Well?' the young man asked. 'Can you—'

He cut off as I held up a finger. Wilson couldn't see my projections, but he knew their rooms. We had to hope that Audrey was in. She had a habit of visiting her sister in Springfield.

Fortunately, she walked into the room a few minutes later. She was, however, wearing a bathrobe. 'I assume this is important,' she said, drying her hair with a towel.

I held up the note, then the envelope with the money. Audrey leaned down. She was a dark-haired woman, a little on the chunky side. She'd joined us a few years back, when I'd been working on a counterfeiting case.

She mumbled to herself for a minute or two, taking out a magnifying glass – I was amused that she kept one in her bathrobe, but that was Audrey for you – and looking from the note to the envelope and back. One had supposedly been written by the fiancée, the other by the young man.

Audrey nodded. ‘Definitely the same hand.’

‘It’s not a very big sample,’ I said.

‘It’s what?’ the boy asked.

‘It’s enough in this case,’ Audrey said. ‘The envelope has your full name and address. Line slant, word spacing, letter formation ... all give the same answer. He also has a very distinctive *e*. If we use the longer sample as the exemplar, the envelope sample can be determined as authentic – in my estimation – at over a ninety percent reliability.’

‘Thanks,’ I said.

‘I could use a new dog,’ she said, strolling away.

‘I’m *not* imagining you a puppy, Audrey. J.C. creates enough racket! I don’t want a dog running around here barking.’

‘Oh, come on,’ she said, turning at the doorway. ‘I’ll feed it fake food and give it fake water and take it on fake walks. Everything a fake puppy could want.’

‘Out with you,’ I said, though I was smiling. She was teasing. It was nice to have some aspects who didn’t mind being hallucinations. The young man regarded me with a baffled expression.

‘You can drop the act,’ I said to him.

‘Act?’

‘The act that you’re surprised by how “strange” I am. This was a fairly amateur attempt. You’re a grad student, I assume?’

He got a panicked look in his eyes.

‘Next time, have a roommate write the note for you,’ I said,



tossing it back to him. 'Damn it, I don't have time for this.' I stood up.

'You could give him an interview,' Tobias said.

'After he lied to me?' I snapped.

'Please,' the boy said, standing. 'My girlfriend ...'

'You called her a fiancée before,' I said, turning. 'You're here to try to get me to take on a "case," during which you will lead me around by the nose while you secretly take notes about my condition. Your real purpose is to write a dissertation or something.'

His face fell. Ivy stood behind him, shaking her head in disdain.

'You think you're the first one to think of this?' I asked.

He grimaced. 'You can't blame a guy for trying.'

'I can and I do,' I said. 'Often. Wilson! We're going to need security!'

'No need,' the boy said, grabbing his things. In his haste, a miniature recorder slipped out of his shirt pocket and rattled against the table.

I raised an eyebrow as he blushed, snatched the recorder, then dashed from the room.

Tobias rose and walked over to me, his hands clasped behind his back. 'Poor lad. And he'll probably have to walk home, too. In the rain.'

'It's raining?'

'Stan says it will come soon,' Tobias said. 'Have you considered that they would try things like this less often if you would agree to an interview now and then?'

'I'm tired of being referenced in case studies,' I said, waving a hand in annoyance. 'I'm tired of being poked and prodded. I'm tired of being special.'

‘What?’ Ivy said, amused. ‘You’d rather work a day job at a desk? Give up the spacious mansion?’

‘I’m not saying there aren’t perks,’ I said as Wilson walked back in, turning his head to watch the youth flee out the front door. ‘Make sure he actually goes, would you please, Wilson?’

‘Of course, master.’ He handed me a tray with the day’s mail on it, then left.

I looked through the mail. He’d already removed the bills and the junk mail. That left a letter from my human psychologist, which I ignored, and a nondescript white envelope, large sized.

I frowned, taking it and ripping open the top. I took out the contents.

There was only one thing in the envelope. A single photograph, five by eight, in black and white. I raised an eyebrow. It was a picture of a rocky coast where a couple of small trees clung to a rock extending out into the ocean.

‘Nothing on the back,’ I said as Tobias and Ivy looked over my shoulder. ‘Nothing else in the envelope.’

‘It’s from someone else trying to fish for an interview, I’ll bet,’ Ivy said. ‘They’re doing a better job than the kid.’

‘It doesn’t look like anything special,’ J.C. said, shoving his way up beside Ivy, who punched him in the shoulder. ‘Rocks. Trees. Boring.’

‘I don’t know . . .’ I said. ‘There’s something about it. Tobias?’

Tobias took the photograph. At least, that’s what I saw. Most likely I still had the photo in my hand, but I couldn’t feel it there, now that I perceived Tobias holding it. It’s strange, the way the mind can change perception.

Tobias studied the picture for a long moment. J.C. began clicking his pistol’s safety off and on.

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'Aren't you always talking about gun safety?' Ivy hissed at him.

'I'm being safe,' he said. 'Barrel's not pointed at anyone. Besides, I have keen, iron control over every muscle in my body. I could—'

'Hush, both of you,' Tobias said. He held the picture closer. 'My God ...'

'Please don't use the Lord's name in vain,' Ivy said.

J.C. snorted.

'Stephen,' Tobias said. 'Computer.'

I joined him at the sitting room's desktop, then sat down, Tobias leaning over my shoulder. 'Do a search for the Lone Cypress.'

I did so, and brought up image view. A couple dozen shots of the same rock appeared on the screen, but all of them had a larger tree growing on it. The tree in these photos was fully grown; in fact, it looked ancient.

'Okay, great,' J.C. said. 'Still trees. Still rocks. Still boring.'

'That's the Lone Cypress, J.C.,' Tobias said. 'It's famous, and is believed to be *at least* two hundred and fifty years old.'

'So ... ?' Ivy asked.

I held up the photograph that had been mailed. 'In this, it's no more than ... what? Ten?'

'Likely younger,' Tobias said.

'So for this to be real,' I said, 'it would have to have been taken in the mid to late 1700s. Decades before the camera was invented.'



'LOOK, IT'S OBVIOUSLY a fake,' Ivy said. 'I don't see why you two are so bothered by this.'

Tobias and I strolled the hallway of the mansion. It had been two days. I still couldn't get the image out of my head. I carried the photo in my jacket pocket.

'A hoax *would* be the most rational explanation, Stephen,' Tobias said.

'Armando thinks it's real,' I said.

'Armando is a complete loon,' Ivy replied. Today she wore a grey business suit.

'True,' I said, then raised a hand to my pocket again. Altering the photo wouldn't have taken much. What was doctoring a photo, these days? Practically any kid with Photoshop could create realistic fakes.

Armando had run it through some advanced programs, checking levels and doing a bunch of other things that were too technical for me to understand, but he admitted that didn't mean anything. A talented artist could fool the tests.

So why did this photo haunt me so?

'This smacks of someone trying to prove something,' I said. 'There are many trees older than the Lone Cypress, but few are in as distinctive a location. This photograph is intended to be instantly recognizable as impossible, at least to those with a good knowledge of history.'

'All the more likely a hoax then, wouldn't you say?' Ivy asked.

'Perhaps.'

I paced back the other direction, my aspects growing silent. Finally, I heard the door shut below. I hurried to the landing down.

'Master?' Wilson said, climbing the steps.

'Wilson! Mail has arrived?'

He stopped at the landing, holding a silver tray. Megan, of

the cleaning staff – real, of course – scurried up behind him and passed us, face down, steps quick.

‘She’ll quit soon,’ Ivy noted. ‘You really should try to be less strange.’

‘Tall order, Ivy,’ I mumbled, looking through the mail. ‘With you people around.’ There! Another envelope, identical to the first. I tore into it eagerly and pulled out another picture.

This one was more blurry. It was of a man standing at a washbasin, towel at his neck. His surroundings were old-fashioned. It was also in black and white.

I turned the picture to Tobias. He took it, holding it up, inspecting it with eyes lined at the corners.

‘Well?’ Ivy asked.

‘He looks familiar,’ I said. ‘I feel I should know him.’

‘George Washington,’ Tobias said. ‘Having a morning shave, it appears. I’m surprised he didn’t have someone to do it for him.’

‘He was a soldier,’ I said, taking the photo back. ‘He was probably accustomed to doing things for himself.’ I ran my fingers over the glossy picture. The first daguerreotype – early photographs – had been taken in the mid-1830s. Before that, nobody had been able to create permanent images of this nature. Washington had died in 1799.

‘Look, this one is *obviously* a fake,’ Ivy said. ‘A picture of George Washington? We’re to assume that someone went back in time, and the only thing they could think to do was grab a candid of George in the bathroom? We’re being played, Steve.’

‘Maybe,’ I admitted.

‘It does look *remarkably* like him,’ Tobias said.

‘Except we don’t have any photos of him,’ Ivy said. ‘So there’s no way to prove it. Look, all someone would have to do is hire a look-alike actor, pose the photo, and *bam*. They wouldn’t even have to do any photo editing.’

‘Let’s see what Armando thinks,’ I said, turning over the photo. On the back of this one was a phone number. ‘Someone fetch Audrey first.’



‘YOU MAY APPROACH His Majesty,’ Armando said. He stood at his window, which was triangular – he occupied one of the peaks of the mansion. He’d demanded the position.

‘Can I shoot him?’ J.C. asked me softly. ‘You know, in a place that’s not important? A foot, maybe?’

‘His Majesty heard that,’ Armando said in his soft Spanish accent, turning unamused eyes our direction. ‘Stephen Leeds. Have you fulfilled your promise to me? I must be restored to my throne.’

‘Working on it, Armando,’ I said, handing him the picture. ‘We’ve got another one.’

Armando sighed, taking the photo from my fingers. He was a thin man with black hair he kept slicked back. ‘Armando *benevolently* agrees to consider your supplication.’ He held it up.

‘You know, Steve,’ Ivy said, poking through the room, ‘if you’re going to create hallucinations, you really should consider making them less annoying.’

‘Silence, woman,’ Armando said. ‘Have you considered His Majesty’s request?’

‘I’m not going to marry you, Armando.’

‘You would be queen!’

'You don't have a throne. And last I checked, Mexico has a president, not an emperor.'

'Drug lords threaten my people,' Armando said, inspecting the picture. 'They starve, and are forced to bow to the whims of foreign powers. It is a disgrace. This picture, it is authentic.' He handed it back.

'That's all?' I asked. 'You don't need to do some of those computer tests?'

'Am I not the photography expert?' Armando said. 'Did you not come to me with piteous supplication? I have spoken. It is real. No trickery. The photographer, however, is a buffalo. He knows nothing of the *art* of the craft. These pictures offend me in their utter pedestrian nature.' He turned his back to us, looking out the window again.

'Now can I shoot him?' J.C. asked.

'I'm tempted to let you,' I said, turning over the picture. Audrey had looked at the handwriting on the back, and hadn't been able to trace it to any of the professors, psychologists, or other groups that kept wanting to do studies on me.

I shrugged, then took out my phone. The number was local. It rang once before being picked up.

'Hello?' I said.

'May I come visit you, Mister Leeds?' A woman's voice, with a faint Southern accent.

'Who are you?'

'The person who has been sending you puzzles.'

'Well, I figured *that* part out.'

'May I come visit?'

'I . . . well, I suppose. Where are you?'

'Outside your gates.' The phone clicked. A moment later, chimes rang as someone buzzed the front gates.

I looked at the others. J.C. pushed his way to the window, gun out, and peeked at the front driveway. Armando scowled at him.

Ivy and I walked out of Armando's rooms toward the steps.

'You armed?' J.C. asked, jogging up to us.

'Normal people don't walk around their own homes with a gun strapped on, J.C.'

'They do if they want to live. Go get your gun.'

I hesitated, then sighed. 'Let her in, Wilson!' I called, but redirected to my own rooms – the largest in the complex – and took my handgun out of my nightstand. I holstered it under my arm and put my jacket back on. It did feel good to be armed, but I'm a *horrible* shot.

By the time I was making my way down the steps to the front entryway, Wilson had answered the door. A dark-skinned woman in her thirties stood at the doorway, wearing a black jacket, a business suit, and short dreadlocks. She took off her sunglasses and nodded to me.

'The sitting room, Wilson,' I said, reaching the landing. He led her to it, and I entered after, waiting for J.C. and Ivy to pass. Tobias already sat inside, reading a history book.

'Lemonade?' Wilson asked.

'No, thank you,' I said, pulling the door closed, Wilson outside.

The woman strolled around the room, looking over the décor. 'Fancy place,' she said. 'You paid for all of this with money from people who ask you for help?'

'Most of it came from the government,' I said.

'Word on the street says you don't work for them.'

'I don't, but I used to. Anyway, a lot of this came from



grant money. Professors who wanted to research me. I started charging enormous sums for the privilege, assuming it would put them off.'

'And it didn't.'

'Nothing does,' I said, grimacing. 'Have a seat.'

'I'll stand,' she said, inspecting my Van Gogh. 'The name is Monica, by the way.'

'Monica,' I said, taking out the two photographs. 'I have to say, it seems remarkable that you'd expect me to believe your ridiculous story.'

'I haven't told you a story yet.'

'You're going to,' I said, tossing the photographs onto the table. 'A story about time travel and, apparently, a photographer who doesn't know how to use his flash properly.'

'You're a genius, Mister Leeds,' she said, not turning. 'By some certifications I've read, you're the smartest man on the planet. If there had been an obvious flaw – or one that wasn't so obvious – in those photos, you'd have thrown them away. You certainly wouldn't have called me.'

'They're wrong.'

'They ... ?'

'The people who call me a genius,' I said, sitting down in the chair next to Tobias's. 'I'm not a genius. I'm really quite average.'

'I find that hard to believe.'

'Believe what you will,' I said. 'But I'm *not* a genius. My hallucinations are.'

'Thanks,' J.C. said.

'*Some* of my hallucinations are,' I corrected.

'You accept that the things you see aren't real?' Monica said, turning to me.

'Yes.'

'Yet you talk to them.'

'I wouldn't want to hurt their feelings. Besides, they can be useful.'

'Thanks,' J.C. said.

'Some of them can be useful,' I corrected. 'Anyway, they're the reason you're here. You want their minds. Now, tell me your story, Monica, or stop wasting my time.'

She smiled, finally walking over to sit down. 'It's not what you think. There's no time machine.'

'Oh?'

'You don't sound surprised.'

'Time travel into the past is highly, *highly* implausible,' I said. 'Even if it were to have occurred, I'd not know of it, as it would have created a branching path of reality of which I am not a part.'

'Unless this *is* the branched reality.'

'In which case,' I said, 'time travel into the past is still functionally irrelevant to me, as someone who traveled back would create a branching path of which – again – I would not be part.'

'That's one theory, at least,' she said. 'But it's meaningless. As I said, there is no time machine. Not in the conventional sense.'

'So these pictures are fakes?' I asked. 'You're starting to bore me very quickly, Monica.'

She slid three more pictures onto the table.

'Shakespeare,' Tobias said as I held them up one at a time. 'The Colossus of Rhodes. Oh . . . now that's clever.'

'Elvis?' I asked.

'Apparently the moment before death,' Tobias said, pointing

to the picture of the waning pop icon sitting in his bathroom, head drooping.

J.C. sniffed. 'As if there isn't anyone around who looks like *that guy*.'

'These are from a camera,' Monica said, leaning forward, 'that takes pictures of the past.'

She paused for dramatic effect. J.C. yawned.

'The problem with each of these,' I said, tossing the pictures onto the table, 'is that they are fundamentally unverifiable. They are pictures of things that have no other visual record to prove them, so therefore small inaccuracies would be impossible to use in debunking.'

'I have seen the device work,' Monica replied. 'It was proven in a rigorous testing environment. We stood in a clean room we had prepared, took cards and drew on the backs of them, and held them up. Then we burned the cards. The inventor of this device entered the room and took photos. Those pictures accurately displayed us standing there, with the cards and the patterns reproduced.'

'Wonderful,' I said. 'Now, if I only had any reason at all to trust your word.'

'You can test the device yourself,' she said. 'Use it to answer any question from history you wish.'

'We could,' Ivy said, 'if it hadn't been stolen.'

'I could do that,' I repeated, trusting what Ivy said. She had good instincts for interrogation, and sometimes fed me lines. 'Except the device has been stolen, hasn't it?'

Monica leaned back in her chair, frowning.

'It wasn't difficult to guess, Steve,' Ivy said. 'She wouldn't be here if everything were working properly, and she'd have brought the camera – to show it off – if she really wanted to

prove it to us. I could believe it's in a lab somewhere, too valuable to bring. Only in that case, she'd have invited us to her center of strength, instead of coming to ours.

'She's desperate, despite her calm exterior. See how she keeps tapping the armrest of her chair? Also, notice how she tried to remain standing in the first part of the conversation, looming as if to prop up her authority? She only sat down when she felt awkward with you seeming so relaxed.'

Tobias nodded. "Never do anything standing that you can do sitting, or anything sitting that you can do lying down." A Chinese proverb, usually attributed to Confucius. Of course, no primary texts from Confucius remain in existence, so nearly everything we attribute to him is guesswork, to some extent or another. Ironically, one of the only things we *are* sure he taught is the Golden Rule – and his quote regarding it is often misattributed to Jesus of Nazareth, who worded the same concept a different way ...'

I let him speak, the ebbs and flows of his calm voice washing across me like waves. What he was saying wasn't important.

'Yes,' Monica finally said. 'The device was stolen. And that is why I am here.'

'So we have a problem,' I said. 'The only way to prove these pictures authentic for myself would be to have the device. And yet, I can't have the device without doing the work you want me to do – meaning I could easily reach the end of this and discover you've been playing me.'

She dropped one more picture onto the table. A woman in sunglasses and a trench coat, standing in a train station. The picture had been taken from the side as she inspected a monitor above.

Sandra.

'Uh-oh,' J.C. said.

'Where did you get this?' I demanded, standing up.

'I've told you—'

'We're not playing games anymore!' I slammed my hands down on the coffee table. 'Where is she? What do you know?'

Monica drew back, eyes widening. People don't know how to handle schizophrenics. They've read stories, seen films. We make them afraid, though statistically we're not any more likely to commit violent crimes than the average person.

Of course, several people who wrote papers on me claim I'm *not* schizophrenic. Half think I'm making this all up. The other half think I've got something different, something new. Whatever I have – however it is that my brain works – only one person really ever seemed to *get* me. And that was the woman in the picture Monica had just slapped down on the table.

Sandra. In a way, she'd started all of this.

'The picture wasn't hard to get,' Monica said. 'When you used to do interviews, you would talk about her. Obviously, you hoped someone would read the interview and bring you information about her. Maybe you hoped that she would see what you had to say, and return to you ...'

I forced myself to sit back down.

'You knew she went to the train station,' Monica continued. 'And at what time. You didn't know which train she got on. We started taking pictures until we found her.'

'There must have been a dozen women in that train station with blonde hair and the right look,' I said.

Nobody really knew who she was. Not even me.

Monica took out a sheaf of pictures, a good twenty of them. Each was of a woman. 'We thought the one wearing

sunglasses indoors was the most likely choice, but we took a shot of every woman near the right age in the train station that day. Just in case.'

Ivy rested a hand on my shoulder.

'Calmly, Stephen,' Tobias said. 'A strong rudder steers the ship even in a storm.'

I breathed in and out.

'Can I shoot *her*?' J.C. asked.

Ivy rolled her eyes. 'Remind me why we keep him around.'

'Rugged good looks,' J.C. said.

'Listen,' Ivy continued to me. 'Monica undermined her own story. She claims to have only come to you because the camera was stolen – yet how did she get pictures of Sandra without the camera?'

I nodded, clearing my head – with difficulty – and made the accusation to Monica.

Monica smiled slyly. 'We had you in mind for another project. We thought these would be ... handy to have.'

'Darn,' Ivy said, standing right up in Monica's face, focusing on her irises. 'I think she might be telling the truth on that one.'

I stared at the picture. Sandra. It had been almost ten years now. It *still* hurt to think about how she'd left me. Left me, after showing me how to harness my mind's abilities. I ran my fingers across the picture.

'We've got to do it,' J.C. said. 'We've got to look into this, skinny.'

'If there's a chance ...' Tobias said, nodding.

'The camera was probably stolen by someone on the inside,' Ivy guessed. 'Jobs like this one often are.'

'One of your own people took it, didn't they?' I asked.

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'Yes,' Monica said. 'But we don't have any idea where they went. We've spent tens of thousands of dollars over the last four days trying to track them. I always suggested you. Other ... factions within our company were against bringing in someone they consider volatile.'

'I'll do it,' I said.

'Excellent. Shall I bring you to our labs?'

'No,' I said. 'Take me to the thief's house.'



'MISTER BALUBAL RAZON,' Tobias read from the sheet of facts as we climbed the stairs. I'd scanned that sheet on the drive over, but had been too deep in thought to give it much specific attention. 'He's ethnically Filipino, but second-generation American. Ph.D. in physics from the University of Maine. No honors. Lives alone.'

We reached the seventh floor of the apartment building. Monica was puffing. She kept walking too close to J.C., which made him scowl.

'I should add,' Tobias said, lowering the sheet of facts, 'Stan informs me that the rain has cleared up before reaching us. We have only sunny weather to look forward to now.'

'Thank goodness,' I said, turning to the door, where two men in black suits stood on guard. 'Yours?' I asked Monica, nodding to them.

'Yeah,' she said. She'd spent the ride over on the phone with some of her superiors.

Monica took out a key to the flat and turned it in the lock. The room inside was a complete disaster. Chinese take-out cartons stood on the windowsill in a row, as if planters intended to grow next year's crop of General Tso's. Books lay in