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The Neighbor's Alibi

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Introduction

Most people remember faces. They see someone once—across a subway car, in the glare of a coffee shop window—and something sticks. The strong jaw, the crooked nose, the smattering of freckles beneath the eyes. To most people, faces mean identity, trust, belonging. To me, they are watercolors left in the rain: washed out, running, always just a little bit wrong.

I live in Apartment 4B, top corner of The Harrow, a century-old brick hulk balanced on the edge of the city's sleepy riverfront. It creaks at night, pipes knocking awake like someone knocking at the inside of my skull. The hallways taste of dust and coffee and, lately, a new layer—a metallic tang, a hint of lemon cleaner trying to erase something it can't. I have lived here three years. I have never once recognized a neighbor's face in the elevator. After the accident, I learned to survive by noticing everything else: the bounce of a walk, the way a hand carries a key, a favorite set of worn shoes. People are patterns now.

In my world, detail is safety. As an illustrator, the way light snakes across molding, or the peel of paint on a window frame, matters more than the expressions of the people who commission my work. My portfolio is full of structures—their bones, their eccentricities. I map memory in buildings, not in faces. Sometimes I wonder if the mind can really trade one kind of recognition for another, or if I'm just pretending competence while something essential erodes.

The Harrow is different every day: a new note in the stairwell, a potted plant gone missing from the rooftop garden, the third-floor hallway light flickering without rhythm. I rely on these cues. Mrs. Valdez, the building manager, always wears clacking red heels that echo like an alarm. Matt Park, one floor down, carries lob-sided grocery bags that dislocate his gait. Jenna Park, his wife—was—Jenna, I mean—her aura was curated calm, her lavender oil trailing behind her like a signature. I used to count on that as my anchor in the sea of anonymous.

Tonight is one of those restless, rain-bruised evenings when the storm is both inside and out. I'm finishing linework for a client when I feel it: a ripple through the wall, sharp and loaded, not a dropped mug but something heavier—a thud muffled by drywall and decades. My stylus clatters to the floor. For a moment, I sit frozen, then press my ear to the wall. Silence, then the faint, off-key whistle of "Blackbird," tumbling up the stairwell. Someone moving fast. My feet carry me to the peephole, but all I see is a hooded figure, head turned, shoulders hunched, left hand smudged with what looks like blue paint. The corridor smells thickly of lemon cleaner, sharp and artificial. The doorframe bears a new streak—barely more than a fingerprint—but I

imprint it in memory anyway, hoping it will matter later.

In the seconds that follow, two realizations knot themselves together: Jenna's apartment door is slightly ajar, and whatever happened, I cannot trust what I see. For the first time since the accident, my inability to recognize a face is not simply a private misfortune—it's at the center of a crime, a web of suspicion, and, soon enough, a desperate fight for my own survival. I am the only witness, but I do not see like other people. In the morning, detectives will come. They'll want answers, but I only have fragments—sensations, shadows, echoes. And somewhere in this building, behind a door I cannot picture, a killer knows exactly how to use my blindness against me.

This is how it begins.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Unreliable Witness

The 911 operator's voice was a flat drone against the ringing in my ears. "Ma'am, can you confirm the address?"

"The Harrow. Four-A. Jenna Park," I choked out, the name catching in my throat. My fingers, still trembling, clutched the phone. The police would be here soon. They would ask questions. And I would have to tell them that I had seen, and yet not seen, a thing.

Footsteps echoed in the hallway, sharp and urgent. Two uniformed officers, then a plainclothes detective, filled the doorway to Jenna's apartment. The air was thick with the sterile scent of lemon cleaner. I recognized the detective by her posture: straight-backed, a subtle lean forward as if perpetually poised to listen. Her hair was pulled back in a neat bun, and she wore practical, dark trousers. No face, just an impression of quiet competence.

"Ms. Hale?" Her voice was calm, almost soothing. "I'm Detective Singh. Can you tell me what you observed?"

I took a deep breath, trying to steady my racing pulse. "I... I heard a thud. Through the wall. Then I looked through the peephole. Someone was leaving Jenna's apartment. Fast."

Detective Singh's gaze was steady, her head tilted slightly. "And what did this person look like, Ms. Hale?"

Here it came. The moment when skepticism would begin to cloud her expression, when her shoulders would subtly tighten. "I can't tell you. Not... not by their face." I watched for the subtle shift in her weight, the tightening of her lips, the tiny tells that replaced facial expressions for me.

She didn't flinch. Not yet. "Can you elaborate?"

"I have prosopagnosia," I explained, the medical term feeling clinical and inadequate to describe the chaos inside my head. "Face blindness. After a car crash a few years ago. I see features, but they don't coalesce. They don't stick together as a whole face. Everyone looks... unfamiliar."

A uniformed officer jotted something on his pad. I could feel their collective assessment, the way they were already recalibrating their expectations of me. I was the witness, but I was also, by definition, unreliable.

“So you can’t describe their height? Build? Hair color?” Detective Singh pressed, her tone still patient, but with an underlying current of urgency.

“Hoodie. Dark. Pulled up. They were... average height? Not remarkably tall, not short. I heard a whistle. ‘Blackbird.’ Off-key. And the smell of lemon cleaner was very strong. Like they’d used a lot of it, quickly.” I paused, remembering the other detail. “And there was blue paint. A fleck on their sleeve. And a streak on the doorframe.”

Detective Singh nodded slowly, processing. She walked over to the doorframe, her fingers tracing the faint blue smudge I’d seen. Then she looked back at me, her brow furrowed. “Anything else? Any distinguishing marks? A ring? A watch?”

I strained to recall, sifting through the jumble of sensory input. The hallway had been dim, the figure moving quickly. But yes, there had been something. A glint. “A watch,” I said, remembering the flash of light. “On their left wrist. The crystal was... cracked. I think.” The memory was fleeting, a quick catch of light, but it was there. A small, jagged fissure across the glass.

The uniformed officer with the notepad exchanged a quick glance with his partner. I knew what they were thinking. A cracked watch crystal? Not exactly a smoking gun.

“Ms. Hale, did you see anyone else in the hallway tonight?” Detective Singh asked, her voice losing a fraction of its earlier calm. She was moving on, trying to establish other avenues of inquiry.

“No. Just... just them. The one leaving Jenna’s.” I felt a familiar frustration building. I *had* seen something. I *knew* what I’d seen. But without a face, it felt like an abstract painting, all color and form, no coherent subject.

Suddenly, a wail ripped through the silence from down the hall. Matt Park, Jenna’s husband, had arrived. His grief was a raw, visceral thing, echoing off the high ceilings. He stumbled towards the apartment, his shoulders hunched, his hands clutching at his hair. One of the officers intercepted him gently, guiding him away. Even from a distance, the broken sound of his sobs sent a chill through me.

Detective Singh turned back to me, her expression unreadable. “We’ll need you to come down to the station, Ms. Hale, give a formal statement.”

I nodded, my stomach clenching. I was a witness, yes. But I was also a puzzle, an anomaly, and already, I could feel the invisible threads of suspicion tightening around me. The killer knew I couldn’t identify them. They knew. And that thought, more than anything, made the hairs on my arms stand on end. The cracked watch crystal was a tiny detail, almost insignificant. But it was *something*. And it was all I had.

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