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# City of Quiet Lies

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## Introduction

On maps, Northbridge looks harmless. A clean crescent of harbor and a modest skyline, the river cutting through like a vein someone promised would always carry good things to the heart. If you trace it with your finger, you can almost convince yourself the water is a seam holding us together. From the hill where the old observatory sits, the city is all angles and glints—windows catching late light, cranes frozen like grasshoppers at the piers, the lighthouse so white it hurts your eyes. The brochures tell you about art walks and farmer’s markets; the drones shoot sunset footage that could sell calm to the sleepless. But they don’t show you what happens when the wind turns and the smell lifts from the water—salt and gasoline and something like antiseptic, something that makes you think of corridors and closed doors.

I moved across town last year, trying to outrun my own scent trails. It’s a losing game, but some habits persist. I teach three sections of narrative nonfiction at the community college and call it stability. I mark up essays in red I promise isn’t aggressive. I tell my students, Show me the small thing. Show me the thread that unravels the sweater. They write about moms who work two jobs, fathers who vanished between paydays, the taste of metal from braces and tap water, the heat of August classrooms. They are earnest and blunt and sometimes brutal without meaning to be, and I sit with their pages at my narrow kitchen table, scratchy with coffee rings, whispering the same advice I can’t take: Don’t be afraid of what’s true.

Once, truth was a job I took seriously. There are framed clippings in a box under my bed—bylines that impressed the older men at newsroom bars and made colleagues roll their eyes and buy me cheap whiskey anyway. People still recognize my name sometimes, though not usually where I want to be recognized. They think I’m the one who exposed the nursing home’s false billing scheme, or the one who disappeared after the chemical spill piece ran, depending on who’s telling the story. Either way, if you leave a job under a cloud, the cloud tends to follow you, and the people who matter learn to keep an umbrella handy.

My sister used to call me detective like it wasn’t a joke. “You can’t help yourself, Evie,” she’d say, tugging her hair back into a knot that never held. “You think if you disassemble a person’s life carefully enough, the good parts will fall into your hands.” She could be cruel like that and then hug me so tight I’d forget it stung. Her name is Maya. I should say was, because that’s what the grammar of every authority insists on now, but even in my head the tense refuses to behave. Maya is what love looked like when it was fierce and inconvenient and refusing to yield. She was two years younger and taller, narrow as a blade and twice as sharp. She volunteered at places that

wanted to be called centers and shelters but were more like patched sails—thin fabric catching torn wind. She believed in causes the way other people believe in heaven. She was always too much for small rooms.

We grew up in a house where the walls were thin and the rules were thick. Our father left before the sound of his boots could become comfortable; our mother taught us to keep our voices down and our grades high. Silence was a currency, even then. We passed it back and forth under the table like a folded note, trading it for safety, for the illusion of peace. In the nights when the house hummed with pipes and our mother cried into the sink, Maya would crawl into my bed and whisper plans. We'll get out. We'll have our own place. We'll never have to ask anyone for anything. In the morning, we would iron our uniforms and walk to school past the mill that had already stopped working but hadn't yet been declared historical. The bridge arced over shale and shadow. We learned early how to cross things we didn't want to look at.

When I think of her now, I think of the scar on my left wrist. It's a thin white crescent, the kind you can't see unless I tilt my arm toward the light. It doesn't belong to a romantic story. It's from a broken mug on a day I dropped more than ceramic. But I carry it the way a city carries a skyline—visible from certain angles, invisible from others, always there. If memory were honest, the scar would tingle when I lied. Instead, it is mute, and my brain does its old tricks, filling in blank spaces with plausible colors, smoothing the edges where the paper tore. There's a smell that drops me back into a place I don't want to name—iodine and lemon cleaner and something metallic, a hospital corridor beyond visiting hours. There's a song that undoes me in the cereal aisle because it played once in a room where the blinds were too low. The mind is generous like that, when it wants to be, and stingy the rest of the time.

When I left the paper, Maya was the only one who didn't treat me like a fallen angel or a cautionary headline. She was angry, which felt more honest. "You don't get to quit," she told me over lukewarm pad see ew at the Thai place on Jasper. "You walk into fires and bring people out. That's your thing." She was volunteering then with a foundation that sounded wholesome enough to make me suspicious: community rehabilitation, public-private partnerships, glossy brochures with stock photos of diverse hands. I teased her about the donor boards and she rolled her eyes, but she didn't tell me everything she was seeing, not then. That was one of our rules: keep secrets if you must, but keep them close enough that you can unspool them fast when the floor gives way.

We had a three-days truce rule too. If we fought—and we did, in ways small and surgical, in ways that landed like paper cuts and then stung for hours—we would wait three days and then call, no matter what. Someone would bring coffee and an apology. We practiced forgiveness without getting good at it. That week, the week I am thinking around instead of through, we were in the middle of a silent patch. Not the three-day kind, the other kind. The kind that stretches because you think there's

more time, that you can fix whatever you broke when the calendar is kinder. I taught my classes, underlined paragraphs, told a student named Jorge to put his mother in the scene if he was going to talk about her at all. The sky kept being gray. I slept badly, as is my habit. The gulls were loud.

Northbridge has places that are always bright and places that make brightness look like an accident. The waterfront is the city's pride, its progressive brochure spread: renovated warehouses with string lights and communal tables, a food hall where you can stand under a neon lobster and pretend your drink was affordable. It's the kind of glow that makes you generous on Instagram and suspicious in real life. Above the waterfront, in the old money streets, the houses sit like witnesses, their porch columns wide enough to hide behind. I walk those neighborhoods sometimes to remind myself how simple rich houses make things look. The lawns are clipped; the dogs are groomed; the security cameras blink. When I get to the statue of Thomas Hale—the patron saint of ribbon cuttings, the man who built and named and renamed—there's always a wreath. His plaque reads philanthropist first. Only in the archives will you find his first development deal, the one that tipped a whole block into history's past tense.

He and men like him were the reason I once believed in what I did and also the reason I still woke with my jaw clenched. You spend enough time in rooms where the air is filtered and the chairs are heavy and you start to believe that truth is a posture, not a practice. Maya had a better tolerance for the performance, maybe because she wasn't pretending not to be angry. She would sit in those same rooms with the same men and let them think her soft, then bite through whatever they offered if it tasted of condescension. The last time we met in person—two weeks, maybe a little more, before the map of days smudged—we sat on the seawall and watched a harbor seal bob between pilings. She told me she was meeting someone about making the shelter's status legit. I told her to get it in writing. She called me a cop without a badge. We laughed, but not with our eyes.

There is a moment before a story tips, when you could still set it down. When you could make a sandwich, take a bath, call your sister and say, Tell me everything without pretending it's nothing. There are a hundred ordinary things I could stack between then and after and they would not change the angle of the fall. I washed my dishes. I watered a plant I would later let die. I wrote a list of groceries on an envelope I never mailed and left it on the counter under a magnet shaped like a lighthouse. Milk, limes, rice. I graded four essays and typed Consider specificity three times, as if the advice alone contained a charm.

At night, when I can't sleep, I count light sources. The streetlamp outside the bedroom window. The blue blink of the charger. The tiny green eye on the smoke detector. I turn my phone screen over so it won't flare at me like a reprimand. That night—the last night that stayed quiet in the file cabinet of my head—I lay awake and listened to the radiator tick like a cheap metronome. I thought about calling Maya and didn't. I

thought about Hannah, my mentor, and how she used to say, “When one door closes, put your boot in the jamb.” I wondered if I’d left my boots somewhere I couldn’t admit I’d never go back to.

The city was windless in the small hours, the way it gets when even the river holds its breath. I dreamed of the old textile mill, not the real one with the rusted roof and graffiti a generation old, but the mill as it existed in a photo I once found in a library book: new brick, clean windows, women in shirtwaists and men in hats facing a future they thought had to be better than the present because the machinery said so. In the dream, the windows were eyes and I stood on the loading dock with my hands empty. A siren broke the day, which is how you know the dream wasn’t real because in Northbridge sirens are the night’s punctuation. I woke to my heart banging like the upstairs neighbor had dropped something heavy. I checked my phone—nothing from Maya, a message from a student about a paper extension, an alert about an incoming storm. I should have written back to the student. I should have gone back to sleep.

In the morning, I walked the two miles to campus because the buses were on a reduced schedule, or because I needed the cold to make my lungs work, or because I never trusted cars that much after. After is a word that changes shape every time I use it. After the story I shouldn’t have chased. After the hospital. After I learned the difference between being right and being safe. My students faced me with eyebrows raised; a sea of hoodies and braced elbows. I told them about second-person point of view until the clock said I could stop. On my desk, a copy of a newspaper with my last byline peered up at me from the recycling bin someone never emptied. I went home through side streets, past shuttered storefronts and a barber shop that has never not been open. The sky threatened rain and then reconsidered. My phone buzzed once in my pocket, then again, then again. I didn’t check because I was balancing a carton of eggs and because you can miss a message and still get to it before the world turns.

By the time I reached my block, the wind had picked up from the south, bringing with it that smell again—salt, gasoline, the high bright sting of disinfectant, like something boiled and scrubbed and still not clean. I stood on the stoop and let it push into my lungs. The neighbor’s cat watched me from the window like I owed him an explanation. Inside, the apartment was a little too quiet. I tossed my keys in the bowl, dropped my bag onto the chair with the sprung seat, and plugged in my dying phone. The screen came to life in a slide of notifications—missed calls, one after another, all from unknown numbers that looked like the city but not the parts I knew. For a second, the air went thick. I felt the old urge, the one that used to send me toward doors instead of away from them. A voice in my head said, Maybe not today. Another said, If not today, when?

I didn’t answer anyone. I made tea and burned my tongue and swore at a kettle that never did anything to me. I ate toast standing up because sitting felt like a commitment. I turned on the radio and turned it off again. Eventually, I did what I

always do when I can't decide whether to run toward or away: I cleaned. I wiped the counters, scrubbed the sink, sorted the mail into piles. I found a postcard Maya sent me three years ago from a beach town we were supposed to go to together and never did. It was cheap and glossy and had a joke written on the back that only lands if you know how much we argued about sunscreen and optimism. I put it on the fridge under the lighthouse magnet. I told myself I would call her when the hour wasn't rude.

There are versions of this story where the moment before matters less. Where we skip to the after and judge the before by how well it predicted the fall. But I keep thinking about the small domestic stupidities that framed the day: the eggs unbroken in their carton, the kettle left on the back burner, the postcard crooked on the fridge, the damp ring from my mug bleeding into the wood grain of the table. It's easy to say you saw it coming when what came stands in the doorway with blood on its shirt. It's hard to admit you didn't see it at all, that you were busy telling a nineteen-year-old to show not tell while the outline of your life smudged at the edges.

When the call finally came—the call I answered, not the ones I ignored—I was in the bath. The ceiling paint is peeling in a corner where the landlord says moisture is inevitable, and I was watching a curl of it loosen as if slow motion could keep it attached. The phone vibrated on the sink. I reached for it, wet and annoyed and human. The number wasn't one I knew. The voice was official, the way the river is official when it floods—one part force, one part apology. They said my name like it could anchor the conversation. They said, Ms. Shaw, and the air thinned. I asked, What happened. They asked, Are you alone. Silence traveled the tile, the way sound does when you've made the mistake of building rooms too hard.

I don't remember much of what I said. I remember the voice asking if I could come downtown, and my mouth saying yes as if I had ever said anything else to a question posed in that tone. I remember standing too fast and dripping on the mat, water pooling under my toes like evidence. I remember the mirror fogging up and my face appearing in it ghostly, then more real, then mine. I dried off, dressed without thinking about what I was putting on, walked barefoot to the kitchen to find my shoes. My phone buzzed again, a small persistent insect. On the screen: a voicemail icon I didn't recognize, the little red dot like a wound.

Memory makes edits. It slices and rearranges and applies filters I don't approve. Some days I forgive it because the raw footage isn't what anyone wants to watch. Other days I want to wrench it back into a shape I can interrogate under good light. I think about this because I have to. I think about this because there are forty-eight hours I could pin to a corkboard and still leave gaps big enough for a body to fall through. I think about this because at the beginning of those hours, before anyone set a clock down in front of me and asked me to account for what it measured, there was a moment that did not belong to the city or to the officials who answer in monosyllables. It belonged, indisputably, to me.

It begins with the car. The upholstery is unfamiliar. The air smells like cold and old leather and a cologne I can't name. The seat beneath me hums, an engine at idle. Streetlights strobe across the windshield, translating distance into bright slices. My cheek is pressed to a coat sleeve that isn't mine. My mouth is dry. There is a sting in my left palm I register before I understand. When I pull my hand back into my lap, the cut is shallow but angry, a red smile already darkening at the edges. My phone is in the other hand, lit without my telling it to be. On the screen, a voicemail sent from my number to Maya's, timestamped at a time I don't recognize as belonging to me. The play triangle waits, small and certain, as if it knows what I said while I don't. I don't remember dialing. I don't remember speaking. I don't remember how I got into this stranger's car or why the city outside the windows feels like it has been holding its breath for me to exhale first.

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## CHAPTER ONE: Blood on the Sleeve

I woke up with my cheek stuck to a coat sleeve and the taste of pennies in my mouth. The car seat vibrated beneath me, a low thrum that felt more like a warning than comfort. Outside, the world was a smear of streetlights and wet asphalt, the kind of blur that happens when you're moving too slow to make sense of anything. The air smelled like old leather and cologne—the kind that tries too hard—and something else underneath, sharp and metallic. I blinked against the dashboard glow, trying to make sense of the digital clock that read 3:47 AM in angry red numbers.

My left palm burned. When I peeled my hand away from the armrest, a thin line of red welled up along the crease, already darkening at the edges. It wasn't deep, but it was clean, like a knife had passed through without hesitation. No debris, no ragged tearing, just a precise cut that throbbed with my heartbeat. I stared at it, mesmerized by how something so small could hurt so much, then realized I was gripping my phone in my other hand. The screen was lit, which meant I had unlocked it recently. The voicemail icon pulsed with a small red dot, taunting me with its certainty.

I didn't remember getting into this car. I didn't remember the drive, the conversation, the cut, or why my phone thought it was necessary to record something from me to Maya at—another glance at the timestamp—1:22 AM. My thumb hovered over the play button. The muscles in my neck pulled tight. If I listened, I might hear something I didn't want to know. If I didn't, I'd be left with a gap in time that felt dangerous. In the end, cowardice won. I pressed the screen to dark and looked around, trying to anchor myself in the physical world while my mind kept drifting backward to places I couldn't access.

The car idled, engine warm, but no one sat in the driver's seat. I was alone. My boots were on the floor mat, scuffed at the toes, mud caked into the grooves. I didn't remember wearing these boots yesterday—or was it the day before? The last thing I could clearly recall was standing in my apartment, staring at the peeling paint above the bathtub, thinking about calling Maya. The gap between that memory and now felt like a cliff I had walked off without noticing. I pressed my palm against the cold window and watched the condensation bloom around my fingers.

Outside, I could see the brick flank of a building and the neon flicker of a sign that said "Rose's Diner" in buzzing pink. The street was empty except for a trash can that had rolled into the curb and a flock of pigeons picking at something shiny. We were parked behind the diner, tucked into an alcove where the garbage dumpsters lived. It didn't feel like a place I would choose to be, which meant I probably hadn't. I tried the door handle. It clicked but didn't open—child lock engaged from the inside. I leaned across

the console and tried the passenger side. Same thing. The car was holding me in.

I found the window button, and the glass slid down with a squeal that made me wince. Cold air rushed in, carrying the smell of frying oil and wet metal. I stuck my head out, scanning the alley. No one. Just a single security light above the diner's back door, buzzing like a trapped insect. My breath came out in ragged puffs. I told myself to stay calm, to think like the person I used to be before I stopped chasing stories and started teaching students how to write them instead. Look for details. Build a timeline. Don't panic.

My phone buzzed again, startling me. I pulled it back inside and saw three missed calls from an unknown number and a text from my mother that was actually from two days ago: *Call me when you get this.* I swiped it away. If I called her now, she would hear the wrong things in my voice and start asking questions I didn't have answers for. I needed to get out of the car first, figure out where I was, then decide who deserved to know. The cut on my hand pulsed. I pressed it against the cool plastic of the console, willing the pain to go away or at least become something I could ignore.

I tried the glove box. It opened with a reluctant sigh and revealed nothing but a tire pressure gauge and a crumpled receipt. I smoothed the receipt out against my thigh. The header read "The Harborview Hotel," with a time stamp from the night before. Room charge: minibar and something listed as "miscellaneous." The total was \$147.82. I didn't remember checking into a hotel. I didn't have a reason to. The Harborview was downtown, a mid-range place favored by business travelers and people who didn't want to be seen in the more expensive waterfront hotels. I stared at the name until it blurred.

Beneath the receipt was a napkin with something written on it in smudged ink. I held it up to the dashboard light. It was a phone number and a single name: *JONAH*. I didn't know any Jonah. I had taught students with names like that, but none who would have written their number on a napkin and ended up in my glove box. I turned the napkin over. Nothing. Just the ghost of a thumbprint in grease. I tucked it into my pocket, along with the hotel receipt, my fingers trembling slightly as they brushed against the cut.

The car was a sedan, older model, with a faint smell of antiseptic wipes underneath the cologne. The upholstery was clean but worn. There was a chain hanging from the rearview mirror, something silver, but I couldn't make out the shape. I leaned forward and touched it. A small medallion, cool against my fingertips. I squinted. It looked like a saint—maybe St. Christopher, the patron of travelers—and the chain was cheap, the kind you get from a gas station. Whoever owned this car, they weren't worried about appearances.

I tried the car's radio. It came alive on a static-filled talk station, voices arguing about

city zoning. The announcer said something about the old textile mill and pending demolition permits. I turned it off. Silence rushed back in, heavy and expectant. I listened to the engine idle, the soft click of the cooling metal, the distant wail of a siren somewhere on the waterfront. Northbridge was waking up, or maybe it had never gone to sleep. I needed to get home before the city fully opened its eyes.

I tried the door again, this time jiggling the handle while shoving my shoulder against it. The child lock gave with a snap, and the door swung open. Cold air hit me full in the face. I stumbled out, nearly falling, and caught myself on the edge of the dumpster. The alley was slick with rain, the brick walls dark and sweating. I straightened, checking myself for injuries beyond the cut. My knees ached, my head throbbed, but nothing seemed broken. I took a breath, then another, and started walking toward the mouth of the alley.

The street was familiar, though I couldn't place it immediately. I was on the edge of the warehouse district, near the old cannery that had been converted into loft apartments. The diner was the only business still open, its windows glowing yellow. I checked my phone again. No signal. I swore under my breath and kept walking, heading north toward the waterfront. The streets were empty, the kind of quiet that only happens in cities between the last bar closing and the first delivery truck starting its route.

I needed to get back to my apartment, shower, change, and figure out what happened. Most importantly, I needed to call Maya. Even if she was mad at me, even if we were in the middle of one of our silences, she would answer if I called at this hour. She always did. I pressed the speed dial for her number, my thumb hovering over the green button. The phone rang once, twice, then clicked to voicemail. "Hey, it's Maya," her voice said, cheerful and distant. "Leave a message. Or don't. I'll know either way." I hung up without speaking. The silence on the line felt heavy.

I was halfway down the block when I heard footsteps behind me. I turned, heart hammering, and saw a figure in the distance. Whoever it was kept walking, hands in pockets, head down. Not chasing me. Just existing. I exhaled and kept moving, my boots splashing in puddles that reflected the streetlights in fractured versions of the truth. I thought about the voicemail again, the one I still hadn't listened to. If I listened, would it change how I felt about the cut on my hand? Would it tell me why I woke up in a stranger's car?

When I finally reached the main road, a taxi drifted by, its light dim. I flagged it down, grateful for the interruption. The driver didn't ask questions, just took my address and pulled into traffic. I leaned my head against the window and watched the city slide by—familiar buildings, familiar shadows, the harbor glinting in the distance. It all looked the same as it had yesterday, and yet I felt like I had crossed into a different version of it without realizing.

By the time I reached my building, dawn was bleeding into the sky, pale and uncertain. I paid the driver and climbed the stairs to my third-floor walk-up. Inside, the air was stale, the kind of stillness that builds when no one has moved through a space for a while. I kicked off my boots and went straight to the bathroom, turning on the shower as hot as I could stand it. Under the water, I examined the cut again. It was angry red, the edges slightly raised. It would leave a scar.

I stood under the spray until the water ran cold, then wrapped myself in a towel and went to the kitchen for coffee. As the machine gurgled to life, I sat down at the table and finally listened to the voicemail.

The voice was mine, but strained, like I was fighting to stay awake. "Maya," I said, slurring slightly. "I'm sorry. For everything. I shouldn't have—" There was a pause, the sound of breathing, then a crash. The recording ended. I played it again, straining to hear background noise. There was something—music, maybe, or voices. And then that crash. I played it a third time and heard something else: Maya's name again, whispered, followed by words I couldn't make out.

I set the phone down. My hands were shaking. The coffee maker hissed. Outside, the city was brightening, but inside my apartment, everything felt darker than before. I looked at the cut on my hand, then at the phone, then at the door, as if expecting someone to walk through it. No one did. The silence was absolute.

I stood and walked to the window, looking down at the street. The taxi was gone. The neighbor's cat was back on the ledge, watching me. The sky was gray, the kind of gray that promised rain. I thought about calling the police. I thought about calling my mother. I thought about calling Hannah, my old mentor, who always knew what to do when things fell apart. In the end, I did none of those things. Instead, I sat down at my laptop and opened a new document. I titled it "Timeline" and began to write down everything I knew, which wasn't much.

*Last clear memory: Tuesday, 8 PM. In apartment. Thinking about calling Maya. Next memory: Wednesday, 3:47 AM. In unknown car. Cut on hand. Voicemail sent at 1:22 AM.*

I stared at the words, willing them to rearrange themselves into something that made sense. They didn't. The gap between Tuesday and Wednesday remained a void, a dark space where anything could have happened. I thought about the hotel receipt, the number labeled *JONAH*, the medallion hanging from the mirror. These were clues, but they were also accusations. They pointed to a version of me I didn't recognize, a person who checked into hotels and left voicemails she couldn't remember.

My phone buzzed again, and this time I answered without looking. "Hello?"

“Evelyn Shaw?” The voice was male, official. “This is Detective Reyes from the Northbridge Police Department. I need you to come down to the station. We have some questions about your sister.”

The air left my lungs. “Maya? What about her?”

There was a pause, heavy with unspoken words. “Ms. Shaw, I’m afraid I have some difficult news. Your sister was found early this morning. I need you to come identify the body.”

The phone slipped from my hand and clattered onto the table. I stared at the wall, at the postcard Maya had sent, at the lighthouse magnet holding it in place. The kettle began to scream, a high, thin sound that matched the ringing in my ears. The world narrowed to the kitchen table, the cut on my hand, the voicemail I hadn’t understood until now. The gap between Tuesday and Wednesday wasn’t just a void. It was a crime scene.

I stood, moved through the apartment like a ghost, and put on clothes I didn’t remember owning. I brushed my teeth, combed my hair, checked my reflection for signs of the person I was supposed to be. The woman staring back had tired eyes and a cut on her hand. She looked like someone who could do terrible things and forget them. I locked the door behind me and walked into the morning, the city yawning awake around me, unaware that its quiet had just been broken.

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