

The Cell

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Malcolm Morris sat alone at the kitchen table in his mother's vacant house. He'd sorted her things and placed them in piles, the job of boxing up her life falling onto her only child's sagging shoulders. Her pocketbook's contents lay scattered before him, credit cards, reading glasses, an empty cigarette case, useless life remnants destined for their final resting place in a forgotten cardboard box.

Lilly, dead? It couldn't be. He'd never considered death an option for a woman who'd grown up gelding horses and shooting coyotes on her grandpa's farm, who could outdrink a man twice her size and still walk a straight line in stiletto heels. Malcolm almost pitied the dark angel who drew the short straw to escort the hard-edged and gritty Lilly Morris to the afterlife. Until the day Malcolm had discovered her face down in a bowl of lentils, a cigarette still smoldering between her fingers, he wasn't sure she *could* die.

Later, he wondered if maybe he'd been right after all.

Dragging a hand across his stubbled chin, Malcolm spied the cell phone poking out of a zippered pocket inside his mother's bag. He fished it out and palmed the device, turning it over in his hands. He stroked the glass, triggering the screen to light, the battery still charged.

Malcolm hadn't had the chance to say goodbye, but maybe if he could hear her voice just once more, it would calm him, bring him peace. He placed Lilly's device on the table, took out his own, and tapped her name on the screen. The cell buzzed, dancing across the wooden table—one ring, two rings, three rings—until her raspy, recorded message barked at him from a long forgotten day.

Malcolm closed his eyes as he listened, her voice right there inside his head. His eyes rimmed with tears as he pressed a reluctant finger to disconnect. Tossing the cell into the bottom of a box, he lined up the flaps and taped it shut.

She won't be needing this anymore.

“Dammit, Malcolm!” Evie threw a glance over her shoulder as she rummaged in the hall closet for her hat and gloves. “Could you at least try to make this work? I need the *old* Malcolm tonight.” Her heels clicked across the foyer's hardwood floor.

Another one of the firm's clients to entertain. At least she's not sleeping with this one.

“Maybe we can prop the old Malcolm beside you two on the couch while this version watches TV upstairs?” He flashed a wan smile.

Evie lowered her sunglasses, fixing him with a stare. “TV? That's the only thing you're good at these days, and I mean the *only* thing.”

Maybe she is sleeping with him.

“Ever since mummy died.” She adopted a spot-on impression of Lilly’s smoky voice. “Oh Malcolm, bring me some tea, will you? That’s a good boy.” She snapped her fingers twice before his face. “Wake up! She died six months ago...and not a minute too soon I might add,” she muttered.

Evie threw open the front door and bounded onto the porch, her free hand releasing the long hair trapped beneath her jacket’s collar. “Now Malcolm, don’t forget to call the caterers and pick up the food. It’ll need to be hot and ready to serve when we arrive, so make sure you get the oven going early.”

Malcolm frowned, anticipating that after her guest left, she’d be off to bed, leaving him to clean up and take care of the dishes, too. Nothing new there. He’d once been a top dealmaker at the firm, probably what had attracted her, but since his dismissal he found himself reduced to little more than houseboy. Funny how *her* affair with the firm’s managing partner had cost *him* his job.

“You can count on me.” He stepped forward to hug her, but her hand shot out, stopping him in his tracks. She wrinkled her nose.

“And for God’s sake, take a shower today.” She gave him the once-over, her eyes betraying her disgust. “You may be down and out, but you don’t have to act like it. Try to maintain your dignity.” She bolted down the front steps and along the sidewalk without looking back.

Maybe Lilly had been right about Eve Hunter. Maybe he should have listened. He recalled the night before the wedding, parked at the kitchen table as his mother circled the room in her bathrobe, bourbon sloshing across the tumbler’s rim as she snarled at him.

“She’s a whore, Malcolm,” she seethed, sucking at the Pall Mall dangling from her lip. “She’s using you. You know it, and I know it. You’ll never be able to satisfy a gold digging slut like her, Malcolm, she’ll wring you out and leave you dry. Why am I even talking, what did you ever know about women?”

Malcolm groped the hall closet’s interior wall, fishing for his wool scarf, wrapping it twice around his neck before throwing on his jacket. Slogging down St. Paul Street to the T stop on Beacon, he jostled his way onto the packed streetcar, lucking into a vacant window seat. He rocked back and forth in the trolley’s gentle embrace as it picked up speed, the city spinning past in a congested blur.

Malcolm leaned his head against the window, catching an average man’s reflection in the glass, no longer handsome, somewhere in the journey’s midpoint, someone you’d pass on the street and never notice. Closing his eyes, he turned away from the stranger in the glass staring back at him.

The past few months had been more difficult than he’d expected. He still hadn’t canceled Lilly’s phone service, the desire to hear his mother’s voice overpowering. Someday he would, of course, but for now, three rings and she was alive in his head once again.

You’re going crazy. That’s what Dr. Haskell would say.

Digging into his jacket pocket, he gripped the cell and scrolled through his ‘recent’ list until Lilly’s name brightened the screen. Like an alcoholic’s hesitation before twisting the cap and breaking the seal, Malcolm’s finger hovered above the glass. He tapped her name as the dazzling morning sun strobed through the building gaps, flickering light across his face as the train thundered forward.

He just needed to hear her voice one more time.

One ring, two rings...then, silence. As he awaited a third ring, a gravelly voice echoed in his head. "Did you miss me, Malcolm?" The air thickened and his vision blurred as he bolted from his seat to the opposite side of the car, dropping the cell as if it were on fire. He wavered on his feet, struggling to keep the world from pulling away.

With his back pressed against the trolley's wall, Malcolm eyed the device, resting underneath the abandoned seat. His eyes darted back and forth, heat from the passengers' stares scorching the back of his skull. With tentative steps, he retrieved the cell and pressed it to his ear.

"Mother?"

"She's no good, Malcolm. She never was."

Malcolm disconnected, Lilly's words sending electricity bolts through his rigid muscles. Needing to escape the packed trolley's confined space and suck the frigid winter air into his pleading lungs, he fought his way through the shoulder-to-shoulder crowd. As the trolley doors opened with a screaming hiss, Malcolm leaped from the top step, rolling his ankle on the hard concrete, nearly catapulting himself into the speeding traffic along Beacon. He landed on all fours, perched on the sidewalk curb's edge, an SUV's churning wheels exploding past his nose, its horn's shriek piercing his eardrums as it rumbled past.

Malcolm sprinted down Beacon until his muscles screamed and his lungs ached. He mopped the sweat from his wispy scalp and swabbed the patchy fog forming on his glasses. By the time he'd keyed the lock and stood in the foyer, he'd convinced himself he overreacted. He collapsed on the living room couch, playing the scene over in his head. Satellite signals got crossed, that's all. Happens all the time. Just an elderly woman somewhere talking to the wrong Malcolm, and there must be thousands of older women and with sons named Malcolm in the Boston area alone.

He gave a nervous chuckle as he headed to the basement, the gnarled wood's squeals and groans marking his descent into the moldy darkness. He threw back the plastic tarp sheltering the boxes he'd hauled from Lilly's house and searched for the one that would calm his irrational fear. Ripping open the package, he fished inside for the cell, shaking the box empty. Purse, wallet, identification cards, tumbled to the cement floor.

It has to be here.

His heart thrummed in his chest as a line of sweat sprinkled his forehead. He tore open each remaining box, scattering Lilly's worldly belongings across the dusty floor. With each box turning up empty, Malcolm assured himself he'd been mistaken, that he'd deposited the cell in the next box, or the next one. Malcolm dropped onto the floor, lost in thought, the dimming light breaching the grimy ground level window and casting lengthening shadows across the room. When Evie and her dinner guest's feet pounded the hallway floor above, he still rested motionless amongst the scattered debris.

"So, Evie hasn't come home yet?" Stephanie Haskell glanced up from the notepad in her lap, rolling the pen between her fingers.

Malcolm shook his head.

"She just needs time to get past her anger. By the time you get home," she checked her watch, "I'm sure she'll be there."

Malcolm squirmed in his seat, digging his fingers into the decorative studs along the upholstered couch arm. "I spoke with her on the phone."

"Okay, well that's a start, when—"

"Not Evie...Lilly."

Dr. Haskell closed her notepad and leaned forward. “You know that’s not possible.”

“I call her sometimes, to listen to her voice. It rings three times, and I get her greeting. But yesterday, she picked up after the second ring.”

Dr. Haskell leaned back in her chair and pocketed her glasses. “Malcolm, look at me.”

He glanced up, but couldn’t meet her gaze.

“Your mother’s dead.”

The sound of her words seeped into his ears as if strained through wet cloth. “She has her cell now.” He stood and circled the room, digging his fingertips into his palms. “I think she’s come back.”

Dr. Haskell eyed Malcolm, pacing the office like a caged animal. “Death is the hardest thing we face in life, Malcolm. The sooner we accept it, the sooner we can move on.”

Malcolm swiped a shaky hand through his thinning hair. “If I call her again, she’s gonna pick up. I know it.”

“Then maybe we could talk to her together,” Dr. Haskell suggested.

“What?” Malcolm stalled in his tracks.

“Let’s work through this, Malcolm. Why don’t you call her now, I think I’d like to talk to her.”

“Lilly wouldn’t like that. There’s no telling what she’d do.” Malcolm could feel the cell heating up in his back pocket, scorching his skin through the trousers’ thin fabric.

“I’m not afraid of her.” She reached her hand out for the cell.

Malcolm’s hands curled into fists behind his back, and the heat spread through his veins until he felt his whole body on fire.

Maybe you should be.

After his appointment, Malcolm Morris stood on the crowded subway platform jostling for space, eyes peering toward the dark tunnel for the approaching train. The cell buzzed in his back pocket. Probably Evie, wondering when he'd be getting home. *Wondering when she could start bitching at me about the other night, more likely.* He snatched the humming device and glanced at the name on the touch screen, the underground station's buzz filtering to silence, the sound muffled in his head as if submerged underwater. Grabbing the stranger's shoulder beside him, Malcolm steadied himself to keep from toppling to the scuffed, cement floor, his eyes fixed on the device's screen. *This can't be happening.* He stumbled through the crowd as the trolley rumbled to a stop with a squeal. He accepted the call, pressing a finger to his opposite ear to drown out the dull roar.

“Surprised?” Lilly growled.

Malcolm slammed a fist over his mouth and squeezed his eyes shut, waiting for a hole in the platform to open and swallow him, to take him away from the madness. He leaned against the station's grimy tiled wall for support. The voice was unmistakable, but wrong at the same time, echoing in his ear as if from a great distance, but seeming to originate within his brain's center lobes.

“Snap out of it, Malcolm!” the gruff voice spat.

“I'm sorry, Mother.”

“Why did you hang up on me yesterday?”

“I wasn't sure if you were...”

“Spit it out, Malcolm! Not sure if I was what...real?”

“Dr. Haskell said you couldn’t have picked up.” Malcolm wrapped his arms around himself, doubling over at the waist. “She said that you’re...” He slid down the wall until seated on the dusty cement floor, legs splayed out in front of him. He pulled with his lungs, but he could draw no air.

“Dead?”

Malcolm nodded, oblivious to whether Lilly could gauge his silent response.

“Well, I may need to have a talk with her, show her just how real I am.”

Malcolm sprang to his feet. “Please, don’t do that, Mother!”

“You don’t happen to have her number handy, do you?” She barked out a grim chuckle.

“She’s helping me...”

“Helping you? By telling you I’m dead? How does that help you?”

“I don’t know, but I think it does. I need to face up to—”

“You need to face up to the fact you’re nothing without me! You never were.”

A sharp intake of breath rattled his ear, no doubt Lilly taking a throaty drag from her cigarette. The swirling ice clinked the side of her glass.

“You don’t need to talk to any doctor. I’m back, and you’re gonna listen to me now.”

“Yes, Mother.”

“You should’ve listened when I warned you about marrying that bitch Eve. She’s no good, Malcolm.”

He nodded. *She’s right, you know.*

“All these women in your life, no good. Especially that whore doctor you’re seeing, trying to drive a wedge between us.”

Malcolm nodded his head.

“Now are you going to cancel your next appointment, or am I?”

Fingers of ice traipsed along Malcolm’s spine. “I’ll go back right now, Mother.”

“That’s good, because you don’t want me going back there.”

Malcolm woke late the following morning, a blizzard of dust motes dancing among the sunbeams breaking through the bedroom window. Rolling over, Evie’s bedside remained undisturbed. Two nights and she hadn’t even called.

God knows living with Evie took a toll, but nighttime had always been the worst. She’d wake him in the middle of the night checking a text, or she’d pull out her laptop—tap, tap, tap—and keep him up for hours. Stretching his muscles from head to toe, Malcolm assembled the pillows behind him, propping himself against the headboard. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d awoken feeling so refreshed. If he could feel this rested after two nights without her, maybe a few days apart would do him good.

He shuffled from the bedroom and down the stairs. Graduating into the kitchen, a slow grin inched across his face at the stack of pans and dishes collecting in the sink. He’d get to them when he was ready.

As Malcolm wandered down the hallway, an odor wafted from the basement. He grasped the handle and cracked the door, his head snapping back as if slapped with an open hand. He jammed it closed, swatting at the bad air.

Smells like a goddamn cesspool down there.

Malcolm strode to the small rectangular hallway window facing the street and peered through it, scanning the road. A Boston Water and Sewer vehicle rested against the curb next to

an open manhole. Two men leaned against the truck, sipping coffee while a third scrambled down a ladder into city's bowels. *Thank God somebody's on the job.*

Malcolm unbolted the front door, stepped onto the porch, and inhaled the chill, winter air to chase the stench from his sinuses. As he snatched the *Globe* folded at his feet, two men emerged from a government-issued Ford sedan parked across the street. Checking for traffic, they jogged across St. Paul, suit jackets flapping in the breeze. They slowed as they reached the sidewalk, smoothing their ties and buttoning their coats.

"Are you Malcolm Morris?" one of them asked, brandishing a gold shield. "I'm Detective Ray Harrington, my partner Paul Becker, Boston PD. Can we come in?"

Oh God, something's happened to Evie. "Is she all right?" Malcolm squeezed the paper, newsprint staining his sweaty hands.

Harrington tilted his head. "Who?"

"Evie, er, Eve Hunter, my wife." Malcolm's stomach dropped.

Harrington and Becker exchanged glances.

"We don't know anything about an Eve Hunter," Becker offered. "We're investigating the death of a Dr. Stephanie Haskell. Someone murdered her in her office late yesterday afternoon. You were her last patient."

Oh my God! Mother. Malcolm flexed his legs to keep his knees from buckling, shifting his weight from one foot to the other to slake the tremors pinballing down his legs. "I'm so sorry."

"What happened to your wife, Mr. Morris?" Harrington inquired.

Malcolm took a deep breath and dabbed at his forehead. "We just got into a little fight, she hasn't been home yet. You guys got me thinking the worst, that's all. Please come in."

Malcolm led the detectives into the living room and offered them a seat, lowering himself into the chair facing them. The room's temperature had spiked and sweat trickled down his back.

Harrington pulled a well-worn spiral notebook from his jacket pocket. With his stylish hair and five o'clock shadow, Malcolm imagined he could have been a celebrity or mega-church preacher.

"Sir, did you notice anything out of the ordinary before or after your visit with Dr. Haskell? Anyone hanging around the office?"

"Not that I noticed."

"Did she seem anxious? Distracted?" Becker added.

She was scared. "I don't remember anything."

Harrington paused a beat. "Aren't you at least curious?"

"Curious?" Malcolm raised his head.

"How she died," Becker added.

Mother strangled her. Malcolm shook his head. "I don't really want to know."

"What's that smell?" Harrington's nose creased as he drew a sharp inhale.

"Sewer lines, I think. There's a city truck down the street working on it."

Becker stepped over to the window and pulled back the curtain. "Where? I don't see anything."

"Just down the street." Malcolm pointed, but Becker shook his head.

Malcolm stood and joined Becker at the window. He gazed toward the spot where he'd spied the truck just minutes earlier. "That's funny, they must've finished up."

Malcolm's cell buzzed in his back pocket. A single bead of sweat jumped from his temple to the corner of his eye. He flicked it away with his index finger as his cell continued to buzz. *God, it's hot in here.*

"I need to take this." If Harrington and Becker heard the cell, they didn't let on.

"Expecting a call?" Harrington asked.

"It could be Evie." *You know it isn't, though, don't you?* "Excuse me." Clutching the cell, he stepped from the living room. He swiped the green phone icon and waited.

"Are those boys giving you a hard time, Malcolm?" Lilly's voice reached into his head.

"What the hell did you do?" Malcolm snapped at her.

"Time to find a new doctor."

"Why did you have to kill her?" he whispered, hand cupping the cell. "I went back, I canceled my appointment like you told me to." *She was so scared.*

"What makes you think I did it?"

"Mr. Morris." Harrington's voice boomed from the living room, echoing off the walls and floors. "We have a few more questions."

Lilly's dead voice rattled in his skull. "Refreshing sleep last night?"

"How do you know?"

"Because Eve's gone now. You figured out that much, didn't you?"

Malcolm's heart paused in its rhythm as the blood drain from his face, then a flutter tickled his chest, kick starting the ticker back into cadence.

"Mr. Morris," Becker stepped into the foyer. "Tell them you'll call them back."

"Mother, I need to go now."

“Sir, that smell’s overpowering,” Becker waved a hand in front of his nose. “You mind if we take a look down there? I’m sort of an amateur plumber myself, maybe I could help with the problem.”

Liar. “I’d rather we keep the door closed, you know, the smell.” Malcolm clamped his arms against his body to keep the sweat from rolling down his sides.

“Odor coming from the basement?” Lilly giggled. “I wonder what that could be.”

“Mr. Morris.” Harrington signaled his partner with a head nod. “Detective Becker’s gonna take a look anyway.” Harrington fingered his holster’s retention strap. “I need you to step away from the door and face the wall. I’m gonna search you, make sure you don’t have a weapon.”

Malcolm turned, leaning against the wall with one arm, the other pressing the cell to his ear. “Mother, what do I do?”

“We got a body down here!” Becker shouted from the darkness.

“They’ll take my cell, Mother, how will I reach you?”

Harrington unholstered his sidearm. “Mr. Morris, you’re under arrest. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will...”

The detective’s words dissolved away, unable to penetrate Malcolm’s ears as he strained to hear his mother.

“Don’t worry Malcolm,” Lilly said, her words fizzling out deep inside his head, “we’ll find a way.”

Becker raced up the basement stairs and unhooked the handcuffs from his belt. “There’s a second body down there too, Ray.”

After they'd arrested Malcolm for the murder of Stephanie Haskell, Eve Hunter, and her lover, Harrington and Becker led him into the Boston Police Station's basement bowels to await his bond hearing. Harrington guided Malcolm through the barred door of the dank, chilly six-by-eight cell and over to the musty cot.

"Can I have my phone back?"

Becker turned it in his hand. "I think you've lost your cell phone privileges for a while."

"Don't I at least get my one call?"

Becker glanced at Harrington, who nodded. He tossed the phone to Malcolm. "I'd make it my lawyer, if I were you."

Malcolm rubbed the charcoal casing's smooth, rounded edges, catching his image in the onyx black, glass screen before powering up the cell. He depressed the green phone icon and scrolled through his recent list. Tapping Lilly's name, Malcolm anticipated her comforting voice. It would tell him what to do, make everything all right.

One ring.

He waited. Lilly would get him out of this situation. She'd take care of things.

Two rings.

Come on, pick up! His heart fluttered, a butterfly let loose in his ribcage.

A click on the end of the line. "Malcolm, you sonofabitch!"

"Evie?"

THE END