

## Tempt My Trouble

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# Tempt My Trouble

by [ProcrastinatingSab](#)

## Summary

A particularly difficult case keeps the FBI on their toes. Malcolm gets too close and finds himself plunged into yet another nightmare.

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BTHB - Chained to a wall (ch4.)

## Notes

Happy Birthday, Hannah!! I love you <3 This was supposed to be a one-shot for a prompt that you really like, but the story kept running from me, and now here we are! I'm really sorry I couldn't finish it all on time, but it's 90% done, I promise :P I'm so thankful for this show because we got to meet <3 I hope you like this!

# Chapter 1

# Chapter 1

Malcolm wakes up slowly, eyes refusing to obey, mind aching for the rare ‘time off’ it was getting. He hasn’t slept in days. There is a case. Always a case. ... Granted, he’s a chronic insomniac anyway, but whenever there is an unsolved case, things seem to get worse.

Malcolm blinks the sleep from his eyes and stares at the darkness ahead. That’s not his bed. It’s a small dark place, and he’s stuffed in it.

His heart skips a beat.

He’s in his father’s chest... locked just like that girl. A minute’s panic consumes him as he tries to wake up from the night terror, tries to get hold of his dreams because he *knows* he's not really in a box...

Is he?

No. If not, then where is he?

Memories of the past hour filter through and Malcolm sighs. He’s not in his father’s box. He’s in the trunk of his attackers’ car.

*Great!* He thinks. Plunged from one nightmare into another.

He can still hear the loud buzzing in his ears, and the muscles at the back of his neck are still twitching. Malcolm knows it’s because of the electric jolt. He never got tased before, but now he can add it to his roster.

Tased on the job. *Check.*

He had everything under control until a third person snuck on him. The taser that was jammed at the back of his neck is the reason he’s in this trunk on an unexpected journey to his death.

Always the corner. *Always.*

Malcolm tries to move around and realizes that his hands are tied together—zip ties by their feel. They’ll be easy to break if he has more room. His legs are free, though, and Malcolm kicks at the taillights, hoping to dislodge them—maybe someone will notice them.

Where are they taking him? Their lair? Maybe they’re going to drop the car in the river, leaving him trapped in the trunk. The thought almost sends him into a full blown panic attack. *It’s illogical*, he argues with his overactive imagination. They said the boss wanted to see him. So unless the boss is Poseidon himself, he shouldn’t worry about being thrown into the water. He forces himself to relax and to think of his next move the second the trunk is open.

The car is driving over a smooth surface—Asphalt. It's slow and steady enough that Malcolm doesn't feel as nauseous as he thought he'll be. The speed at which they're going suggests that they're still in the city. Although it's quite late, they don't speed up. They understand the risks of attracting attention.

Left with nothing else but to wait, Malcolm works on his strategy for what's to come. *One:* He should find Emily and Sarah. *Two:* He should bring the operation down. *Three:* Accomplish one and two without dying... *hopefully.*

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## 2 hours earlier

When Malcolm first got his job with the FBI, he picked a place just a few blocks away from the office so he can walk to and from work every day. He loves walking, for many reasons. He walks to organize his thoughts, walks to stay in shape, and walks because he hates driving. But mainly, he walks to exert himself as much as possible in hopes of collapsing when he reaches home. Because the only way he can sleep is when he's exhausted enough to pass out.

Tonight he wishes he took a cab.

It was a long day. The FBI had all hands on deck for their recent case. The kidnapping of Business Tycoon Daniel Brady's two daughters, Sarah and Emily Brady (19 and 21). The girls were taken from a nightclub downtown four days ago and haven't been seen since. There were no witnesses to the kidnapping and no security camera footage. Their usual bodyguard was sick, and the replacement one, Max, went for a bathroom break, and when he came back, they were gone. The driver claimed he saw nothing unusual, as well.

The first assumption was that the girls slipped away to go on a wild adventure. It's not uncommon for people their age and from their social class to do that. Kids would disappear for a few days and end up in Hawaii or Tahiti. Malcolm knows this first hand (Ainsley had planned an exotic adventure with her friends before he found out and foiled her schemes. She was *not happy* .)

However, the girls' parents were offended and angry when this option was even suggested and adamant that their daughters weren't like that. Coupled with their friends' testimony and the fact that there were no credit card transactions at all, the FBI was forced to abandon this possibility and look at it as a possible kidnapping. When Mr. Brady wasn't contacted for any ransom after forty-eight hours, the worst option was brought to the table. The team was looking at a possible trafficking situation. As usual with human trafficking cases, they were running against time to find the girls before it was too late.

Malcolm drags his legs through the streets. He's almost home. *Finally*. He's tired, mentally and emotionally exhausted, and nowhere near finding a break in the case. Well, he has a theory, but no one wants to listen to him.

Agent Colette Swanson was named primary on the case, and she doesn't like anyone second guessing her profiles—most of all, Bright. Malcolm hates how hostile she is towards him. He tried to lie to himself and pretend that she just doesn't like him. But the truth is she doesn't trust him. *Because of his father...* no one trusts the son of the serial killer. She'd said as much once during their dispute about a profile. It had hurt, but he swallowed it down like a big boy and acted like she never said it. The sting, however, was still there, and it played in his mind every time they argued.

Just like in yesterday's department meeting. According to her, they were looking at a coincidental kidnapping. The girls were pretty, vulnerable, and they weren't regulars at the place. No one knew them or would notice them leaving. The MO seemed to match that of several cases throughout the city. Therefore, she had everyone looking into the major human trafficking rings and their associates. Her profile was reasonable, and so everyone accepted it. They respect Colette, trust her—she has a commanding presence and an impressive closure rate. Malcolm can't deny that she's good at her job either. It's just he thinks she overlooks stuff sometimes.

So, he proposed another theory...

After she finished her debrief, he threw in the possibility that this was a targeted trafficking case. Swanson had rolled her eyes, shut him down, and urged the others not to waste time. The eye rolls and the scoffs he received were discouraging, but Malcolm didn't back down. He explained his point of view anyway: that while he agrees that the girls were kidnapped with the purpose of trafficking, this looks more targeted than coincidental. He had suggested that someone with a vendetta against the father paid for the girls to be trafficked. Maybe a disgruntled business partner, or so.

He supported his hypothesis with the emails sent to the girls advertising the club's excellent atmosphere and secret visits by many celebrities in disguise. Malcolm had asked the club managers, and they denied knowledge of said emails' existence or their contents. The girls were catfished to that club for a reason. It was also the same day that their bodyguard had called in sick, and they were unprotected. It was targeted.

"Mr. Brady said he didn't have any enemies," Colette had countered.

"A business tycoon like him, he's bound to have at least one. When are they ever honest with us?" Agent Reynolds replied, and Malcolm gave her a grateful look.

Swanson gave Agent Reynolds an icy glare before shutting Malcolm down again. "Agent *Bright*. I'm well aware of your need to always steal the spotlights, but this is a delicate matter."

Malcolm clenched his jaw. *Of course, she'll attack him personally.* It's because she knows his theory is possible, or even right.

"We don't have time to waste any resources based on a hunch."

"But I'm right. If we catch the person behind this, they'll fess up. It's faster, and we're running out of time."

"The emails could be a prank."

"And they could lead us to the actual culprit. At least have cyber look into it," he implored.

"Fine!" and if looks could kill, Malcolm would have dropped dead. "I'll put Perez and Johnson on it. And in the meantime, we will proceed as already planned. We don't have the

time to make mistakes. I'm primary on this case, and I won't lose the girls because I followed your *hunch*."

"It's not a hunch—" he tried to say, but she cut him off.

"We have coincidental emails, a mystery villain, and no actual leads to go on. If you wanted us to listen to you, then you probably should've prepared a list of suspects. The way I see it, this case has just turned into yet another bad father's past endangers his kids' lives. Bad things sometimes just happen, *Agent*. There doesn't have to be a reason for it. Now let's get back to work. Time is of the essence."

Remembering what she said makes Malcolm wince again. He'd ignored her and looked into any possible suspects in Daniel Brady's life.

Malcolm's search had yielded *many names*. Yet one name really stood out. Marcus Henby. He was one of the original investors in the startup, which was now an empire.

One day, Henby's name was removed from all the websites. Malcolm faintly remembers his mother speaking about it. Something about a business scam? However, all online sources of such disputes have disappeared from the internet. Malcolm wasn't sure who was behind it: Brady or Henby. Lucky for him, he knew a friend who kept archives of newspapers, and that's where he got the information. The information he read was enough to paint Henby as a perfect suspect.

Malcolm smiled. He had a name. Colette was wrong. He comes from a wealthy family, and he *knows* you don't get that much money without having some buried skeletons in your wardrobe.

Then he started digging and asking questions. He even went to meet the man himself, who refused to see him without a warrant and threatened to call his office should he come again. Malcolm politely left... only to ambush the guy on his lunch break in the nearest restaurant. He'd introduced himself with a bright smile, and the man, seeing that he was with guests, couldn't not reciprocate. He had asked a couple of questions before he was given a card and a *promise* of a "call my office, and we can schedule a proper meeting." A promise that Malcolm knew Henby will *not* honor. He was lying through his teeth, exhibiting aggressive behavior, and his body language was screaming foul play. It didn't matter, though, because Malcolm had enough.

Tomorrow he's planning to show his findings in the next department meeting and ask for support to issue a warrant. Getting Henby to cooperate will lead them to the girls faster.

All he has to do now is sleep and relax for a bit. Tomorrow is an important day.

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Malcolm finally reaches his loft. It feels like he'll collapse the minute he enters. He hopes he'll be awake enough to fasten his restraints before passing out.

He pushes the keys inside the lock and turns it open, and is surprised when one turn is sufficient to let him in. Didn't he lock the door before leaving this morning? It won't be his first time. Maybe he was too preoccupied to lock it.

Silence greets him. He hates it. Gil had suggested he gets a cat to keep him company, but Malcolm isn't really a cat person. Granted, he loves Gil's cats very much, but they're different—they're Gil's cats. Maybe he should get a bird. Jackie loves birds, and she can help him pick one that can get accustomed to his... loud screaming.

Malcolm doesn't bother switching on the lights when he enters, relying on his own memory to navigate his place. When he's halfway to his bedroom, he hears movement. Stealthy and quiet, but still audible. There is someone in the loft. Malcolm stops, stills his breathing, and listens. He is a few steps away from the other light switch. Once he opens it, he needs to be quick. Malcolm reaches for the other light switch, flicks it open.

The light fills the loft, and Malcolm sees the intruders. Two men are standing on opposite ends of the room, and Malcolm doesn't know where to direct his attention. *That's why the door wasn't locked.*

The man to his left is smiling. Teeth bared like a wild animal who's just spotted prey. A silver tooth shines where the light reflects over it, and somehow it makes him more menacing. The man is staring Malcolm down contemptuously. He's holding a butterfly knife, and he keeps flipping it. The second man is a few inches taller than Malcolm and carries himself well. He's more athletic and clearly the muscles between the two. He, too, is eyeing Malcolm hungrily, and like Silver Tooth, he's armed with a shiv.

Malcolm realizes that these people aren't burglars who he just happened to stumble upon. These people are here for him, ready to fight. He wonders if they were planning to ambush him while he slept and were surprised to find an abandoned bed and an empty loft. Do they know he's an FBI agent?

"Did Marcus Henby send you?" Malcolm ventures, trying to gain some information beyond the basic assessment of the two men before him.

Silver Tooth's smile broadens, but he shrugs.

"Did he also tell you to take two other girls? Emily and Sarah?" Malcolm continues. "They were taken four days ago from Lux Night club. Do you know anything about that?"

Muscles looks at Silver Tooth. "That's a first. This one talks too much."

"Right, I also have a gun," Malcolm says. He doesn't—he left it in his office safe tonight. "But I don't have to use it. I work with the FBI. It'll be bad for you to get involved in anything. Maybe we can talk. Figure something out?"

“You can’t shoot us both at the same time and dodge our knives,” Silver Tooth says with his amused expression.

*Well, fair point*, Malcolm thinks desperately. “I just want to warn you that this won’t end well,” he tries to sound sincere.

“Yeah,” Silver Tooth agrees. “For you, it won’t.”

They eye each other for a few more moments, and then the room spurs in action.

Malcolm ducks behind the living room couch as Silver Tooth throws his knife. It misses anything vital, nicks him on his bicep, and falls on the floor with a loud clang.

Adrenaline pumping, Malcolm reaches for the knife. Well, it’s no axe, but it’ll do. He peeks up and throws it. A hand yanks his collar, and he’s thrown against the wall just as he hears Silver Tooth curse and scream. Muscles pins him against the wall, his arm pressing against Malcolm’s neck, applying enough pressure to keep him in place. Malcolm’s hand curl around Muscles arm, trying to pry it away. His eyes widen in terror as Muscles brings his own shiv up and aims it at Malcolm.

Before he gets the chance to use it, Malcolm kicks out and hits him between the legs. The arm around his neck loses its grip, and the shiv falls out of Muscles hands as he bends over. The profiler delivers a brutal right hook followed by a left one. He finishes with an uppercut that sends the man hugging the floor.

He stays there.

Panting, Malcolm realizes that he has only one set of handcuffs. He must improvise... and he needs to call for backup as well.

He looks around. Where is Silver Tooth?

The pain igniting at the back of his head answers him. He staggers forward, uses the back of the couch to break his fall. He turns as quickly as possible and makes space between him and Silver Tooth, who’s *very angry*. The smug smile is erased, and instead, a deep growl and rage color his expression. It fills Malcolm’s heart with pride despite how dizzy he feels. The knife he threw hit its target, and now the man’s thigh was oozing a steady stream of blood.

Silver Tooth looks like he’ll kill the profiler if he gets the chance. He is holding the broken neck of one of Malcolm’s whiskey bottles, and Malcolm assumes that’s the source of his pain. He reaches a hand to the back of his skull, winces when he touches an open wound, and brings his hand back to find shards of glass and blood. He feels the blood wetting his shirt.

Muscles is still out cold, though. That’s good—one person at a time.

“We can still end this,” Malcolm says and feels nauseous the second he opens his mouth.

“I’m two seconds from saying screw the payday and ending you now,” Silver Tooth growls.

So it *was* a grab job.

Muscles moans. Stirs. Malcolm takes this as a sign to move. He cuts the distance between him and Silver Tooth. Silver Tooth lashes out with the broken bottle, but Malcolm deflects. He grabs that wrist, flips, and bends it outward. The man cries out and tries to break the hold but fails. The glass falls from his hand, and he growls as the move brings him to his knees. Malcolm is always appreciative of this move—one of the very first self-defense moves Gil had taught him.

The profiler whips out his handcuffs, slaps one around that wrist, turns Silver Tooth, and cuffs his other hand behind his back. Under him, Silver Tooth keeps spitting insults and threats. Malcolm sighs and takes a minute to catch his breath. He needs to find something to tie Muscles up and then call this in.

The roaring blood in his ears is the only thing he can hear as he makes his way into his bedroom. Malcolm grabs the spare portable bed restraints he has and makes for the living room. Once he has Muscles restrained, he can call for backup. Malcolm storms out, and as he's walking towards Muscles, he hears a zap. It's so loud that it's audible over the blood rushing in his ears. It's only a second later that he feels the burn at his side and his body spasms. His legs give out. Hitting the floor with a thud, Malcolm lets out a shuddering gasp and tries to fight the wave of unconsciousness threatening to take him.

A third figure hovers over him. Malcolm's vision is spotty, and he can't make up his features. Where did *he* come from? More adrenaline surges in his system in a desperate attempt to keep him awake. Malcolm twitches on the floor and tries to regain control over his muscles. He gets his knees under him, and as he starts to move away, the metal is jammed against his neck this time. Malcolm sees white and is out before he reaches the floor.

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Notes

Hannah <3 <3 !! The shock collar prompt starts here!!!

Editing this chapter made it go from 2k to 4k! Laughs in 'this was a one-shot'

Please enjoy!

## Chapter 2

The ride was much longer than Malcolm had anticipated. He was cramped, his limbs were numb, and he was one wrong thought away from a panic attack.

The only redeeming aspect of this ‘ride to death’ was that it wasn’t very bumpy. In fact, after some time, the car’s constant motion was lulling him to sleep. Malcolm tried to fight the urge at first, but his eyes were heavy, and he was exhausted—the fight with Silver Tooth and Muscles has exerted him completely, and the taser was the icing on the cake. Coupled with a total of five hours of sleep over three days, Malcolm barely had any energy left to spare. So, he gave up and allowed himself to drift off, knowing full well that he would leave one dark and stuffy place and enter another.

Phantom nightmares of girls in boxes and his father’s fox-like smile invaded his dreams, dancing in his subconscious. Mercifully, before they mount to their usual climax, Malcolm’s sleep is interrupted. Malcolm rolls to his side, his center of mass changing, and the gravity pulls him deeper into the trunk. He wakes up, and for a second, confusion and fear race side by side in his mind until he realizes that the car is no longer driving straight. They’ve reached, and they’re going down—probably some underground parking.

The wheels squeal as the car takes steep turns and then flies over the bumps with no care to the human stuffed in the trunk. Malcolm cries out as his head slams up at the top of the trunk on each bump. The repeated motion makes him nauseous, and he’s not sure that he won’t puke the second the car stops.

Finally, the driver parks. The car engine dies down, and Malcolm hears the doors of the car open and slam shut.

Three doors. Three people. Probably the same ones from the loft.

Malcolm readies himself to execute plan A: attack as soon as that trunk opens. He counts the three seconds for them to reach the trunk and fists his hands together; he can deliver a straight punch with both fists to incapacitate one and kick out to hurt the other. He will improvise with the third.

The trunk opens, and bright light invades his eyes. Malcolm squeezes them shut. After so much time in total darkness, it feels like he is staring at a supernova. Unable to see, Malcolm kicks out blindly, hoping to catch any of his targets. A fist crashes into his sternum and steals away his breath. Malcolm’s cry of pain is soundless. He can only writhe in pain as their hands grip his shirt front and haul him out of the trunk. Not even giving him a chance to recover, a hood is pulled over his head, and he’s dragged away.

Ironically, Malcolm is grateful for the hood because it lessens the intensity of the light stabbing at his irises. He takes a few moments to adjust and then slowly opens his eyes. The hood isn’t made of very thick material, and when he squints, he can make out the silhouettes

of the people around him and the overall structure of the place. It looks like an abandoned facility—maybe an old school or hospital.

The men dragging him—probably Muscles and Silver Tooth—pull him through multiple doors and endless corridors. Malcolm's sure they're underground—therefore, he's surprised when they walk through a closed door and then go *down* the stairs. An illegal basement, his mind helpfully supplies. Something tells him he won't like what's down there.

Malcolm tries to keep up, but going down the stairs without your eyesight is impossible to do—especially with two angry men pushing you. He stumbles more than once, misses a step, and loses his balance. On his third stumble, they don't help him find his footing. Instead, they just release his arms, and Malcolm finds himself falling face forward, plummeting the rest of the distance down. He lands ungracefully on the cold stone floor and grunts when his palms take the brunt of the fall. It wasn't a long one, but the terror that gripped his heart as he fell was enough to make him feel faint afterward. They laugh and pull him up again, and on they keep walking.

The secret underground floor smells moldy, feels stuffy, and is way darker than the upper floors. Visibility through the hood is even worse, and no matter how much he squints, Malcolm can't see his way.

The panic that's gnawing at his heart keeps growing with every step he takes into the unknown darkness ahead. Malcolm reigns in the overwhelming urge to fight back. The way his hands are zip-tied would make it easy to fight, easy to break free. Yet common sense tells him that there are way more than three people in this place, and attacking without a plan will be unwise. *Plus*, Emily and Sarah might be trapped here, and if so, then Malcolm has to find them first!

They stop abruptly. Malcolm hears the sound of an automatic click, the squeaking of an old rusty door, and then he's roughly shoved inside. Malcolm loses his balance and finds himself sailing for the floor. He lands on his knees and immediately removes the hood. Not wasting time, he's up again and running towards the door. The door slams shut before he reaches, and Malcolm finds himself alone in a bare cell. He still hurries to the door and inspects it. It's too strong to kick down, there is no inner handle, and without the keycard, the door won't open. The door's a dead end.

Malcolm checks the room next, tries to look for other possible escapes but finds none. There is a glass window next to the door. He looks through it and encounters his reflection. He immediately knows what this is: a double way mirror like the one they use in interrogation rooms. The traffickers probably use it to spy on their prisoners all they want. The notion that someone might be watching him right now chills him. Instinctively Malcolm recoils from the window like he just touched a hot surface. Something about being observed like a lab rat makes him even more restless to get out. The window is too small to be useful. Also, he knows from experience that the glass is unbreakable.

The rest of the room is empty except for an old bare mattress on one side and a bucket on the other. Malcolm isn't planning to stay long enough to use either. There are no cameras he can see, which is about the only good news he has so far—that and the fact that his wrists are tied

in front of him. Taking advantage of the only thing he can control, Malcolm breaks the zip ties around his wrists to free himself.

Having regained full range of his limbs, he inspects the door and the window closely, checking the floor for any loose bolts and screws. Finding none, Malcolm moves to the mattress. It's old and moldy, and he reigns in the urge to vomit when he touches it. Malcolm presses on it, examining it, and swears when he finds that it doesn't have any coils he can use. The mattress is purely feathers or cotton or sponge or whatever...he really doesn't care. These people are smart, and they left nothing to chance.

They've taken his belt, jacket, tie, and shoes, and there is nothing he can use to save him from this nightmare. In his frustration, he kicks at the mattress. Malcolm eases to the cold ground—he won't sit on that mattress no matter what—and rests his head against the wall. The room isn't cold, but it's chilly. If he stays here for long, it might get uncomfortable. Malcolm closes his eyes and tries to breathe through the overwhelming despair that is choking him. He's alone.

Completely and utterly alone.

He doesn't know if the FBI will notice his absence in time. Even if they did, something tells him that with their resources mainly focused on finding Emily and Sarah, finding him will come last.

He wishes he had a group of people he can trust and depend on—a group of people who *trust* him back and treat him like one of their own.

A team.

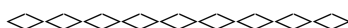
It would have made this wait easier: because he knows that they will keep looking for him no matter what. Now he is *his* only hope.

*I can do anything if I set my mind to it.*

*I can do anything if I set my mind to it.*

*I can do anything if I set my mind to it.*

Malcolm repeats his daily affirmations to help ease his mind as he waits. After some time, he almost swears it worked.



Malcolm notices that while the traffickers made sure they can observe their prisoners unnoticed through one-way mirrors, they haven't made any attempts to soundproof those cells. The echo of footsteps down the corridors is strong and audible... almost like it's broadcasted into his room. He assumes it's used as an intimidation technique—an alarm that

someone is coming. However, it's useful for him because when he hears those footsteps, he gets up and readies himself to fight.

Two sets of footsteps. Two men.

Quickly, Malcolm grabs the metallic bucket and hides behind the door, away from any prying eyes that can spot him through the glass window. He hopes that whoever enters first is not armed. A few seconds is all he needs to attack. He holds his breath as the door swings open.

"It's time for you to meet the boss," the voice from before says—it's Muscles.

Muscles filters in the room and Malcolm waits until his head is visible from the door before making his move. The profiler brings the bucket on the unsuspecting man's head. As Muscles cries out and falls to the ground, Malcolm kicks the door, catching the second person as he enters. A blasphemous swear alerts him that his target had been hit.

Muscles recovers faster than Malcolm anticipated. He's up on his knees when Malcolm smacks him again.. *hard*. This time he falls and *stays* down. Satisfied that he's incapacitated, for now, Malcolm turns around just in... *time to see Silver Tooth's gun sticking in his face*. Malcolm's heart skips a beat. He raises his hands in surrender and moves back against the wall when Silver Tooth orders him to.

"Turn around, asshole," Silver Tooth spits, and Malcolm slowly obeys. "Hey, Pike, you okay?"

Muscles or Pike only moans.

"Not dead. Good," Silver Tooth observes as he wrenches Malcolm's arms violently behind him. Metal handcuffs click around his right wrist and then his left. "Your cuffs, cop," Silver Tooth hisses in his ears as he tightens them to hurt. The metal bites into Malcolm's skin, and he swallows the grunt of pain that wants to break free.

"We got off on the wrong foot, but we can talk about this," Malcolm tries.

"Shut it, or I'll fire that thing in your back." The nozzle of the gun is pressed between his shoulder blades to prove a point. Malcolm knows he won't do it, yet he feels his heart sink with fear and stops talking. Silver Tooth's hand fists in his shirt collar, and Malcolm is pulled from the wall and turned around. "Move," Silver Tooth snarls.

Malcolm doesn't resist and walks to where his captor is directing him. He's moving slow, trying to avoid any surprise movements: The man is on edge, and Malcolm fears he'll end up pulling the trigger if he attempts anything.

They're halfway through the cell when something catches his foot. Malcolm stumbles and dives towards the floor. With his hands behind his back, there is no way to break his landing. He goes down hard and miraculously manages to keep his nose from taking the brunt of the fall. His shoulder, however, isn't so lucky: it is going to bruise.

"PIKE!" Silver Tooth shouts. "Are you fuckin' stupid?"

Malcolm turns and looks behind him. Muscles' hands are wrapped around his foot. *It's the reason he fell.*

Muscles looks like he's seething—this is the second time Malcolm knocks him down. Malcolm can see it in his eyes—the pure animalistic rage. Muscles pulls Malcolm's leg toward him, and in a second, he's straddling the profiler. Malcolm sees his fist as it rises in the air, and with his hands tied behind his back, crushed under his weight, he can't do anything but take the punch. It lands hard; Malcolm feels like his cheekbone has chattered. He utters a broken cry as his vision blurs.

“Who do you think you are, fucker,” Muscles spits, and Malcolm watches in horror as his fist rises again. Instinctively, he closes his eyes as the fist dives towards him. He prepares himself for the pain ... but it doesn't come.

He cracks open one eye and sees Silver Tooth's own hands holding Muscles' fist, and arresting its momentum.

“Stop it, you fool!” he snarls, “Not the face!”

“I'll knock his teeth off if I want,” Muscles growls.

“The hell you will,” Silver Tooth shouts back. “Get off him. We have a job to do.”

Muscles gets up, and Malcolm lets out a breath he didn't know he was holding.

“He needs to pay,” he points at Malcolm. “He knocked me out with the piss bucket.”

“You should've watched your back,” Silver Tooth snaps.

“Like you did with that knife?”

“*Excuse me?*”

Malcolm lays dazed on the ground and watches both men argue on the side. His jaw is sore, and his mouth is full of blood—he probably bit his tongue or something. Malcolm checks for any missing teeth and is relieved when he finds them all intact.

The argument is getting heated—Muscles is now pushing Silver Tooth. Malcolm needs to take this opportunity and run while they're distracted. He gathers all his strength and tries to get up as noiselessly as possible. He's not very graceful and almost falls on his first attempt. The second one is more successful, and Malcolm sways on his feet before finding his balance.

The second he's up, both men stop talking and realize what's happening. But they're further away in the room, and Malcolm is by the door. Not wasting time, Malcolm runs outside, turns quickly, holds the handle with his bound hands, and closes the door. He hears the electrical lock sound and sighs in relief.

Trapped inside, Muscles and Silver Tooth bang on the door with a vengeance. Malcolm doesn't have long before the others come looking for them. He needs to move fast. The

handcuffs around his wrists are tight and uncomfortable, and he can't slip out of them without wasting valuable time. He'll have to run in them.

Malcolm walks fast but noiselessly. Peeking into the glass windows of each room, he tries to look for the girls. There are six other holding cells, and each has two to three people inside. It makes Malcolm's blood boil. He needs to help all those people escape, but he can't do it alone. He has to call for backup after he locates Sarah and Emily.

Sure enough, he finds them in the fifth cell he looks into. Malcolm turns around and taps at the door. He makes sure it's not very loud to alert the others but loud enough for the girls to hear.

No one answers him, *obviously*, so he calls out. "Emily! Sarah! Umm... My name is Malcolm Bright. I'm with the FBI. Hang in there, and I'll try to get you out, okay?"

Malcolm sees Emily get up and walk towards him, and he presses his ears to the door so he can easily hear her.

"Thank god. Where are the rest?" She says, and Malcolm is impressed by how steady her voice is. He assumes it's because she's trying to be strong for her sister. It's what he'd do for Ainsley.

"Please get us out of here!" Another voice calls out. Sarah. Unlike Emily, her voice trembled when she spoke.

"Umm... it's just me," he tells her, and he feels like a fool for not calling for backup first. "I'm all alone right now, but don't worry. I'll get you out. I promise. Are you hurt?"

"What do you mean you're alone?!" Sarah wails.

"Yes, and how do we know you're not lying?" Emily continues, and she tries to sound firm, but this time, he hears her voice waiver. "The FBI wouldn't just send *one guy!*"

"Umm, well, they didn't send me," Malcolm debates what to say. "I kind-of found you on my own. Eh... long story."

"Well, let us out, please! You don't have a key?"

"No. My hands are a bit tied up right now, but I'm here to help. Can you hang in there for me? I'll be back, I promise."

"No! please, don't leave," Emily says brokenly.

Before he can reply, Malcolm hears shouting coming from where his cell was. Dammit, He thought he would have more time.

"Shit. Gotta go! Sorry. Wait for me!" He says and bolts.

The profiler doesn't know where to go, but it doesn't matter. He needs to get away and safely contact the FBI. He tries to find the stairs that lead upstairs, but each turn is yet another

hallway. The shouting behind him gets louder. Sneaking a look, Malcolm sees Muscles and Silver Tooth limping, along with two other men who're running and closing in on him. *Great.* Malcolm runs faster... faster than he ever did in his life. If they catch him, he's as good as dead.

The corridors are endless, and he can't find an exit. Malcolm takes lefts and rights until a startled man blocks his way.

"What's going on?" he barks and then notices Malcolm.

Malcolm panics; for a second, he thinks about stopping but then decides against it. He runs into the unsuspecting man with all his momentum, sending both of them to the ground. The man under him grunts and swears. Before he tries to push Malcolm off of him, the profiler makes his move: he headbutts the man. Aiming for maximum impact, Malcolm goes for his nose and hears a crunch after to confirm. The man cries out, and Malcolm stumbles to his feet and continues running.

This time he doesn't look back because he knows the others are closing in on him. The headbutt had affected him too, but he can't stop. He has to keep moving.

"Stop, or I swear I'll shoot," Silver Tooth is shouting.

*If I stop, I'm dead too.* Malcolm thinks as he keeps running.

A bullet flies over his head, and his heart leaps. *Not aiming. Just a tactic.*

Malcolm stumbles on something and goes falling. He's up in a second and running again. Then, he sees the stairs.

*Finally!!*

Panting, Malcolm runs up the stairs, taking two steps at a time. He reaches the first floor, where a locked door greets him. Faintly, he remembers they passed by a door before they went down the stairs last time.

Shit! He looks left and right, but there is nowhere he can go but down, where a group of furious people wants to capture him or try to break that door and keep moving.

He doesn't have time, but he also has no other option: he won't wait for them to find him. Malcolm kicks the door two-three times. The footsteps behind him are getting closer. He hits it again. This time he hears one of the hinges give out. If he can kick it one more time, he might actually break it.

Someone crashes into him, and he goes hugging the door.

*No.* Malcolm struggles, but then more hands are on him.

"GET OFF ME," he screeches even though he knows it's useless.

It's over.

He failed.

He's turned around, and he faces five angry men staring right back at him as he gasps for air. Two people grab his arms, and one grips his hair, and he's dragged away from the door and down the stairs again. When he's down, they enter a different room where he sees Silver Tooth. He's limping towards him. Malcolm remembers the stab wound, and despite his overwhelming panic, he feels proud for injuring the man.

"We've never had anyone escape from this facility before." Silver Tooth hisses. "And you won't be the first."

The hand in his hair makes it impossible to move his head. Malcolm can only stare at the man before him.

"What do you want us to do with him, boss?" One of the men asks. "Everyone else heard him escaping, and they're all banging on their doors hoping to escape, as well."

"Oh, he'll pay for it," Silver Tooth says. "*And*, we can make them all watch."

The men snicker, and Malcolm feels his body break in goosebumps. The men release him, and then he's pushed to his knees. A kick to his back sends him to the floor. Malcolm grunts and tries to get up, but he's being pinned again. They hold his feet, his hips, and his shoulders. Hands grip his hair and push his face against the floor. Malcolm tries to struggle, but he can't move an inch. All he can do is breathe as his cheek rests on the cold floor.

Silver Tooth kneels next to him and smiles for the first time since Malcolm's loft. "You're gonna wish you stayed in your cell and behaved, *Cop*."

Malcolm can see he's holding something, but he can't make it out from his angle. Silver Tooth reaches towards his head, and another wave of panic causes Malcolm to writhe under the men. He doesn't know what's happening, and his fear signals are all firing in alarm. Every instinct in his body is screaming at him to run.

"Shhh, it's going to be fun," Silver Tooth chuckles.

Something cold touches his skin, and Malcolm flinches. It's metallic. The hand in his hair pulls his head up, and the metallic ring is fastened around his neck and closes with a click.

A collar.

"*No*," Malcolm rasps out in spite of himself as he realizes what's happening. It only makes everyone in the room laugh.

Anger and indignation flare inside him. But the fear that manifests deep in his bones is enough to overshadow all the other emotions...

"Here we go," Silver Tooth says and gets up. Following his lead, everyone else moves away, leaving Malcolm sprawled on the floor. Slowly Malcolm pushes himself up and stays on his knees. The collar fits snugly around his neck, and it's heavier than he would have expected. Malcolm begins to suspect it's much more than just a standard collar, and his panic

skyrockets. He looks around, and all he sees is mocking glances observing him. They look like they're watching a show. With growing dread, he realizes it's him. *He's the show.*

Gathering whatever courage he can muster, Malcolm stares defiantly at his captors. Silver Tooth stands in the middle. Muscles is right behind him. And somewhere on the left, there is the other guy that Malcolm busted his nose. He has tissue paper sticking out of it, and Malcolm feels a sick feeling of satisfaction at this view.

"We haven't collared anyone in ages. It looks good on you," Silver Tooth observes, and the men echo his enthusiasm. "Let's try it out."

Malcolm's heart stutters, but he doesn't let it show. "Fuck you," he spits. Then he sees white.

It's like his throat is set on fire. The world is burning, and he can't even scream his agony away. The collar feels like it's getting tighter and tighter around his neck. And he can't breathe, he can't cry, he can't do anything to make it stop. He wants to pry the collar off, but he can't. His hands are handcuffed behind him, and no matter how much he tries, the cuffs won't give. It's all too much, and he'd beg them to stop if he can breathe if he can find his voice. Still, all he can do is writhe in pain and wish for it to end.

When it finally does, Malcolm finds himself on the floor again. His ears are ringing, and his muscles are shaking, and he still feels like he still can't get air into his lungs. He moans, and he can't stop the tears that stream down his face.

It's like he suspected, he thinks faintly. Not just a collar... it's a shock collar.

"That's for fighting back," Silver Tooth says, and then he hisses. "I hope they sell you to an abusive bitch so they can break you down piece by piece. In the meantime, we get to play with you."

"No!" Malcolm gasps. "You won't get away with this," his voice is hoarse, and his throat hurts when he speaks, but he pushes himself nonetheless. Part of him is terrified of Silver Tooth triggering the collar again.... though he knows it's inevitable.

"Oh, I will. You're helpless now," he tells him mockingly. "Because. I. Have. this!" He shows Malcolm a small remote. "And I can do this. Whenever I want." Malcolm has a second to brace himself for the pain a second time. It's worse. A hundred times worse. When it's over, he almost weeps with relief. A coughing fit overtakes him.

How did it escalate to this? He was running for help. He was supposed to save the girls. Instead, he's the one who needs saving. They're going to torture him and sell him if they didn't kill him first. For the first time since this night started, Malcolm's actually scared.

He's roughly lifted from the floor, hands clenching around his biceps like iron. It's funny because he can't even stand on his own now. Not to mention that he's handcuffed *and* collared, so there is no way he can escape. But Malcolm knows why he's being treated this way. It's because he attacked them, more than once, and threatened their entire operation. They'll be rough with him, and he can't do a thing about it. Failing to keep his head up, Malcolm lets it fall and rest on his chest as they walk him back to his doom.



## Chapter 3

### Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry I haven't updated this or any of my other fics lately. The past couple of weeks were very tough—work and submissions and all... barely had time to do anything else!

I'm slowly getting back on track! <3

Enjoy this one 💕💕

## Chapter 3

Malcolm wakes up to his neck pounding—throbs synchronized with his heartbeats, too loud to ignore, too strong it feels like the floor is shaking. He feels it at the base of his skull, behind his eyes, and roaring in his ears. He doesn't remember ever feeling like that, not even during his worst migraines.

Keeping his eyes closed, Malcolm tries to sink back into the blissful darkness. He's not ready to meet the world yet, not ready to fight round two.

Not yet.

So, he just lies there on a cold floor and wills the pain to go away. Maybe even pretend that he's at home, battling a hangover.

*Home.* Even though he knows it's probably a day or so, it feels like he's been here for a week. When he woke up that morning, forcibly optimistic and eager to solve the case, he never thought he'd end up in the hands of human traffickers, collared and humiliated, and probably about to die.

At the thought of the shock collar, a residual tremor travels through him, and he feels his limbs tingling at the memory. Malcolm screws his eyes shut against the feeling of pins and needles left in the collar's wake. The metal strap fits snugly around his throat, making it hard to swallow and even harder to breathe. But, while its cold metal sends shivers down his spine, it also acts as a balm to his neck's already inflamed and sensitive skin.

They'd shocked him again after they threw him back in his cell. Silver Tooth let Muscles do it. The men had their reconciliation, Muscles had his payback, and all Malcolm got was pain. Muscles had slammed that button on the remote with so much excitement that chilled Malcolm—he knew the man wanted revenge, but that gleam of sadism was something he didn't expect to see. He didn't dwell too much on that thought because the agony started right after. The current surged through him, set his world on fire, and stole his breath away. Muscles didn't stop. Unlike the times with Silver Tooth, the pain kept going on and on, and Malcolm had closed his eyes with the belief that he wouldn't open them again.

It's a miracle that he did.

Now, Malcolm lies face first on the floor with his hands arched painfully behind him. His wrists are still bound with his handcuffs, and his shoulders are aching from being in this position for so long. The metal, cold and unrelenting, bites into his skin, adding to his discomfort. They really have it in for him now. The stupid collar wasn't enough, but they also had to keep him restrained. It lowers his chances of escape by *a lot*.

Malcolm fights a stupid and overwhelming urge to cry. If the FBI had listened to him, if Colette hadn't dismissed him at every turn, this wouldn't have happened. Now they might end up losing both the girls and one of their agents. Part of him wonders if they'll even feel his loss if he was killed or lost in the trafficking system. If anything, he thinks that the

paperwork is what will irk them the most. Maybe they'll feel sad for a few days, guilty for a week or two, and then get over it and forget him. But overall, many will be relieved that they won't have to work with a serial killer's son anymore.

But his family will miss him. Ainsley and his mother. Gil and Jackie. They might not even know what happened to him—forever forgotten. The thought itself is so painful that Malcolm feels his heart aching. Yet it's also the emotional drive he needs to get out of his head *because he will not die here*. Malcolm locks these thoughts away and focuses on the here and now. He can't fail. His family cares about him; they need him. Most importantly, *the girls need him*. And he made a promise to get them out!

With renewed energy and the will to survive, Malcolm slowly opens his eyes, ready for the fight ahead. What he sees surprises him. It's dark, but he's not alone. The sound of bodies rustling and clinking metal chains is so obviously audible he wonders how he hadn't heard them until now. Malcolm forces himself to focus and listen, and despite the hammering in his head, the hushed voices and whimpers filter through. Broken whispers, cries, and the unmistakable sound of fear.

From where he is, sprawled on his belly, he has no visual. Malcolm needs to get up and take in the whole picture and figure out his next move. He shuffles to his side and attempts to get up. Almost immediately, pain flares everywhere, and the world spins. Malcolm falls back to the floor, moaning, and squeezes his eyes shut against the pain. He just needs another moment before he tries again.

"Agent Bright?" A woman's voice says, and Malcolm's eyes fly open. Emily.

Her voice provides an extra incentive, and Malcolm tries a second time. He successfully gets onto his knees and finds his center of mass to avoid toppling over again. He looks around, taking in every detail of this new cell. It's bigger than the other one. He spots around ten people chained to the walls—most probably those he found in the cells. An uneasy feeling settles in his stomach about this new arrangement, but Malcolm tables the thought when his eyes fall on the sisters.

Emily and Sarah are sitting in the far corner on the other side of the room. The girls' hands are free, but there are cuffs around their ankles connected to a thick chain that tethers them to the other people. They're ready to transport them. The thought makes his mouth go dry—he doesn't have much time. After a quick survey of his state, Malcolm realizes he's not chained similarly—they probably thought the handcuffs and the collar were enough. That or they decided he's going to die here tonight. He needs to move fast.

Malcolm remembers that he still hasn't replied to Emily. Both girls are eyeing him with a mixture of fear and confusion. Malcolm realizes that they haven't seen him. They only heard his voice—which will probably sound different now. He hasn't tried talking yet, but he knows it'll probably hurt. He winces and forces himself to speak. "Yes," he rasps out, and dammit, it hurts to speak. "You can call me Malcolm."

The relief that fills their eyes suddenly morphs into horror when they realize that their rescuer is in a worse shape than they are. It needs no profiler to see the minute their despair sets in.

Sarah's eyes well with fresh tears, and she buries her face in her hands while Emily holds her and tries to soothe her.

"Hey! Hey, I know it looks bad, but I have been in worse situations. Don't worry, okay? I'll get us out of here." Malcolm forces out, trying to sound comforting, but he's sure it's not very convincing.

Emily's eyes travel over him, studying him. When her gaze falls on his neck, the inquisitive glance turns into one of fear and pity. Malcolm shifts under the scrutiny, feels uncomfortable under her gaze but says nothing.

"Are you too hurt?" She asks tentatively. When he raises an eyebrow, she explains. "You're bleeding."

Malcolm follows her eyes until he spots the blood covering his sleeve. "Oh, it's nothing," he says dismissively. He forgot about the small slash from his fight in the loft, and the glass bottle Silver Tooth broke on his head. It's nothing compared to how he feels at the moment that he forgot all about it. "Just a flesh wound. Nothing serious. Don't worry about it."

He doesn't wait for her reply and sets into action. He takes a few deep breaths and slowly works his shoulder to bring his hands in front of him. An advantage of being restrained with handcuffs as opposed to zip ties, is that he can actually have some freedom to perform the trick. It takes him a couple of tries and a few grunts until he's successful. Malcolm tries to flex his muscles and groans when he feels them shift and move—his situation has already improved.

Malcolm is aware the others are watching them. Yet, no one has made any attempt to engage in their conversation or focus with him. He's not sure how long they have been here, but they look much worse than the girls do. Maybe that's a reason for their silence. However, still unsure if a spy is in their midst, he decides to make his way towards the girl's corner.

"How did you do that?" Emily asks incredulously as she points at his hands.

"One of the many benefits of doing yoga," Malcolm smiles. "It helps calm your mind and also keeps your joints flexible."

She gives him a small smile, herself.

"May I?" He gestures towards her ankle. Emily extends her leg and nods. Malcolm checks the chains and tries to see any weakness he can exploit. He works in silence at first, but the chain keeps shaking—the only sign of fear that Emily's showing—and he feels awful for her. He decides to fill the silence to break the tension. "Do you know why they took you out here? Did they say something while I was out?"

"They don't say much," Emily mutters. "I don't know how long we've been here. Apart from the meals they give us, that's the first time they let us out of our ...umm... the *room*." Her voice breaks, and she takes a second to breathe, fighting her tears. "We thought they were going to let us go. But then they left us here. Said something about a show."

“They want money from our dad, right? Why hasn’t he paid them yet? We just want to go home” Sarah raises her head and asks him.

Malcolm’s stomach clenches, realizing that they haven’t figured out what’s waiting for them if they don’t get out of here. Or maybe they don’t want to figure it out.

“Don’t worry. We won’t stay here much longer.” Malcolm says. “I have a plan!”

“You do?” Sarah asks with arched eyebrows.

Malcolm nods, trying to assure her. “I do.” *He really doesn’t.*

“We can’t just walk out of here,” Emily says. What she doesn’t say is: *They’re restrained. He’s hurt, handcuffed, and can barely walk steadily across the room. There is no way he has any plan.*

She’s a smart girl.

Malcolm wonders if enough time has passed for the FBI to notice he’s missing. He’s guessing it’s almost evening by now. He’s always on time, never late, never takes sick leave. They should have known something was wrong when he didn’t show up this morning.

*Right?*

“You really think so?” Martin casually strolls into the room, and Malcolm rolls his eyes. It’s really not the time for this. He hasn’t been off his meds for long—probably missed a dose—and it’s not that much of a stressful situation.

“Really? What do you consider a stressful situation, then?” Martin mocks him. “You’re collared like some disobedient dog, at the mercy of angry human traffickers who want to kill you. You failed those girls even though you’re trying to convince yourself otherwise, and you’re waiting for your FBI *friends* to notice your absence,” Martin scoffs loudly, “and *investigate*. Son, even I know that’s a bridge too far. They’ll be relieved when you don’t show up.”

“Shut up!” Malcolm snarls, and he winces when his throat hurts—so far, he has been quiet and calculating with his words. Leave it to his father’s hallucination to ruin everything.

“Excuse me?” Emily says, and Malcolm’s head whips towards her. Had he said that out loud? *Oh great, now they’ll think he’s crazy.*

“Nothing,” he gives her an overly cheerful smile. “It’s fine.”

She bites her lips and drops it, but he knows she’s not convinced. “So, what’s your plan?”

Malcolm curses internally. He has no idea. Just as he’s about to speak, the door creaks open, and Silver Tooth and Muscles enter, followed by Broken Nose and another one. Four Men.

All around the room, nervous whimpers echo—Malcolm sees the others cower in their corners, trying to attract as little attention as possible. Instinctively, Malcolm puts himself

between them and the girls, straightens up, and glares at them. They stand at the door, eyeing him as well, each one exhibiting a different range of emotions when their eyes find him in that corner. Broken Nose is angry, glaring at him with wide bulging eyes. Silver Tooth's mouth twitches, but otherwise, he betrays no emotions. Muscles, on the other hand, is thrilled—he laughs even. “See, he’s already up and moving.” He says, then turns to look at Silver Tooth. “Told you the shock wasn’t that strong. I thought you would be smart enough to sit still, being FBI and all.” Muscles walks, making his way to where Malcolm is. “Those the two girls you’ve been whining about? You think you can save them?” He says and spits on the floor in contempt.

“Pike! Wait.” Silver Tooth says, and Muscles turns to look back at him.

“What?” he snaps and throws his hands in the air.

Silver Tooth moves a few steps towards Malcolm, his calculating eyes burning a hole through him. He produces the remote to the collar from his pocket and holds it out for Malcolm to see before he speaks. “Get up,” he commands without even raising his voice—and he knows that Malcolm will obey. He has no choice, and both men know it.

Malcolm glowers at him for a second before moving. He grunts as he forces himself to stand. The world tilts on its axis as he moves, but he forces himself to keep standing.

“Good.” Silver Tooth says. His eyes fall on Malcolm’s hands, now in front of him, and he smiles. “Oh, you’re a clever *agent*. Aren’t you? Now step away from the girls and move over there.” He gestures to the place where Malcolm woke up. Malcolm starts walking, taking slow steps so he wouldn’t lose his balance. He’s aware that every pair of eyes are fixed on him as he wobbles across the room.

Finally, he reaches and turns around to meet his captor’s eyes. Malcolm puts all of his anger and defiance into that look. He might be under this man’s thumb for now, but it doesn’t mean he’s lost the battle.

“See, Pike?” Silver Tooth looks at Muscles. “You don’t have to be so aggressive. He’ll obey. Won’t you?” he says amusedly.

Malcolm stares at him and says nothing. He sees the man press on the button a second before the pain actually starts. Malcolm gasps, falls to one knee, and then just as soon as the pain begins, it stops.

It was just a small jolt, not as painful as the other ones, and yet equally horrible. Malcolm lets out a shuddering groan and tries to keep his balance. He focuses on his hands in front of him and tries to breathe. It was just a small jolt.

Strong hands grab his jaw and pull him up to his feet—Silver Tooth. His fingers dig into his cheeks forcing Malcolm to look at him. Malcolm blinks the haze away and stares into the man’s eyes.

“When I ask a question, you will answer it, *agent*. Do you understand?” Silver Tooth whispers, and he’s too close.

*Too close.*

Malcolm thinks for a second before he acts. The way Silver Tooth is touching him, he can't activate the collar without shocking himself too. He knees the man in the groin and wrestles the remote out of his hand. Silver Tooth goes limp in his hold just enough for Malcolm to slip the remote in his pocket and hold him in a chokehold. Every muscle in Malcolm's body aches, but the adrenaline firing in his system is enough to keep him moving. Once Silver Tooth is contained, he looks around frantically, taking in the rest of the room.

Broken Nose and the other man have their batons up, Muscles is holding a gun, and every other captive in the room is shrinking even further away from the scuffle. Silver Tooth's hands are scratching at Malcolm's arms, trying to claw out of his hold. Malcolm tightens his grip, and the man stills.

Muscles aims his gun at Malcolm. "Let him go!" He snarls.

Malcolm makes no move to obey. Muscles has no clear shot, and both of them know it. From what he saw, he knows that Muscles won't hesitate to shoot Silver Tooth if he can, but he also knows that he won't do it with the other two here to see it.

"What do you think you'll do now?" Broken Nose chimes in. "You're unarmed and outnumbered, and there is no way we're letting you waltz out of here."

And Malcolm already knows that. He knows what he did is useless and incredibly stupid—he doesn't even have a weapon to defend himself. He stares at the men and says nothing, though. Not because he doesn't want to, but because he doesn't know what to say. They won't let him go. They won't let the girls go, and if it stays for long, Muscles will probably shoot him and the man in his grasp and call it a day.

"Fine," Muscles growls and walks towards the girls. He points the gun at Emily, and a hysterical sob escapes her lips. "Leave him, or I'll blow her head off. One!" He starts counting.

Sarah's terrified sobs echo along with her sister's. Eyes wild, heart hammering, Malcolm grits his teeth and tries to think.

"Two."

Muscles might shoot Silver Tooth, but he'll never shoot the merchandise. He's not stupid—no one shoots their source of income. *Right?*

"Three."

Maybe he can get Silver Tooth to order his man down. All he has to do is just squeeze a bit.

"You know what, no more counting." Muscles says and shoots.

The gunshot echoes in the room so loud it drowns all other sounds. Malcolm's mouth falls, his balance tips for a second when he thinks of what just happened.

Did he get the girl killed? Was his profile wrong?

For a second, he feels like he can't breathe. A second that feels like a century before he realizes that the screaming is coming from the girls. Malcolm blinks and forces himself to look, *actually look*. The bullet was fired just an inch above Emily's head. Both of them are fine. Hysterical and terrified, but alive.

"I won't ask again, let him go, or the next one goes in her head for real." Muscles shouts. "Fuck the payday. You've caused us enough trouble as it is."

Under him, he hears Silver Tooth snicker.

"Let. Him. Go." Muscles repeats menacingly.

Malcolm releases his hold before Muscles even finishes his sentence—he can't risk anyone getting hurt. He takes a step back and lets Silver Tooth stagger to his feet.

One second the man before him is coughing and running his hand over his neck soothingly, and the next, he's smashing into Malcolm and knocking him to the ground. They go down *hard*.

"Fucker." Silver Tooth growls, angry. He's far angrier than Malcolm has ever seen him. Malcolm only has a second to brace himself before the man's fist crashes into his sternum. The force knocks the air out of his lungs and leaves him stunned on the floor, gasping for air. While he tries to get his breathing under control, the man reaches into his pocket and retrieves the remote back.

And the shock starts.

Electricity surges through his body burns his neck, and he feels like his neurons are on fire. He's in agony. Trapped in a loop—his own personal hell. Then it all stops. Malcolm twitches on the floor, muscles shaking uncontrollably, and his breaths are coming out in horrible wheezes.

Before he can recover or do anything to protect himself, someone straddles him and holds one of his legs. The others do, too, and Malcolm can no longer see Silver Tooth. Fear grips his heart, but squirming doesn't help him. Not with the man's entire weight crushing him.

"Horses kick out because they are animals. And even when they do, they get punished." Silver Tooth tells him. More hands are on his leg, and Malcolm's blood turns cold.

*No!*

The terror floods his system, and he thrashes despite being completely immobilized. It's useless, and he knows it.

"That'll teach you." Silver Tooth says, and Malcolm hears a very loud and audible snap.

He chokes, his vision goes white, and for a millisecond, the world ceases. Pain like molten lava engulfs him and swallows him whole. Malcolm lets out a blood-curdling scream to voice

his anguish, but it's not enough.

The man straddling him gets up, and then the pressure on his leg disappears. Malcolm lays dazed on the floor, his body overwhelmed with pain, and he doesn't struggle when they start moving him again.

# Chapter 4

## Chapter Notes

This chapter is for BTHB box: Chained to a wall.

Note: there is some humiliation (name calling) in this chapter and swearing.

## Chapter 4

The world goes on, but Malcolm remains dazed on the floor. Everything is dull compared to the pain he's swimming in. When someone moves him, another wave of agony engulfs him, and he cries out. What's left of his energy, he uses it to stay awake, but it is getting harder by the second. They roughly shove him, so he's lying face first. Someone's hand is on his collar. Malcolm hears the sound of something clicking before they walk away.

A beat.

Nothing happens.

Another passes, and another one, and he's still left alone. No one speaks to him.

Slowly, the tension in Malcolm's muscles eases a bit. No longer frozen with the fear of more shocks or the immediate danger of death, Malcolm works on trying to recover. He swallows the tears clogging his throat, takes a couple of slow breaths, and opens his eyes. The roaring pain in his foot has subdued and is now a dull throbbing—it's bad that he can't stand on it, but not bad enough that he can't get up. He's pretty sure his foot is broken. A quick look at the swollen ankle is all the visual confirmation he needs. Somehow, his situation keeps worsening by the minute, and he's not sure he'll make it out of here alive anymore.

Not like this.

Trying not to dwell in self-pity, Malcolm braces himself on his elbows and checks the room. It can't have been more than ten minutes since he attacked Silver Tooth, and he needs to know why no one was talking to him.

The man in question is on the phone, and he looks like it's something important—his eyes keep darting towards the girls who are crying softly. Broken nose is having a conversation with Muscles on the side, and the last man is standing guard by the door, clearly bored. They don't look at him as he moves around—he's sure they noticed he's up due to his very audible grunts whenever he moves—yet they're pretending he doesn't exist.

Malcolm bites his lips and forces himself to get up. It takes time, but after a few grunts and whimpers and gasps of pain, Malcolm makes it to his knees—that's when he feels something going taut. He barely contains his look of horror when he realizes that the collar is now connected to a leash that's bolted to the wall. They'd chained him like some animal. The indignation of it all overwhelms him, making him forget all his pains. He grits his teeth, stands on one foot to test the leash's range, and gets angrier when he realizes he can barely take two steps away from the wall before it pulls on his collar. He swears under his breath and turns around to inspect the bolts in the wall. The metal is worn with use but strong, and the chain is padlocked to it. There will be no escape by force this time—no escape at all.

Malcolm turns to look at the traffickers, and although they look preoccupied, he notices Muscles snicker. Malcolm glares back. He can't remain standing on one foot, and he's sure if he went down to the floor, he might not be able to stand up again. Choosing the middle

ground, Malcolm leans back against the wall and waits for Silver Tooth to finish his call, as well.

A few more hums and nods later, the man hangs up. When others look at him expectantly, Silver Tooth nods, and their response is a collective smile that chills Malcolm. They're practically buzzing with energy at the news, and the man standing guard hurries out. Whatever they have planned, it isn't good, and it doesn't bode well for him at all. A few minutes pass before he comes back, carrying a tripod and a camera.

*Great.*

While the man sets it up, the rest move to the center of the room facing him. They're excited and amused, no doubt, enjoying the look of panic that he cannot hide. Silver Tooth is smirking again—he's wearing the same smug expression when they first ambushed him at his loft. They know they won.

"Will you look at that," Silver Tooth saunters towards him and stops just a few inches away, so he's out of reach. "The leash works on you, *agent*. Keeps you in place. Just like any disobedient dog."

The booming laugh from everyone else makes him flush, and he feels the heat rise to his neck and cheeks. He stares daggers at them but chooses to say nothing—nothing he says will save him now... but a few punches might *if they get close*.

"We were just going to have our fun in private, have the others witness what happens when someone acts out of line. But it has been so long since we had some fun, and we thought we would record it and keep it. You know, for the memories."

And for evidence, Malcolm thinks. If the FBI ever manages to track them. The man turns the camera on, and Broken nose moves forward.

"Can I have the remote?" Broken Nose asks. "Pike got his revenge. I want mine too."

Silver Tooth eyes him for a few seconds, and Malcolm holds his breath. A shock for entertainment hurts, but he knows it'll stop eventually. A shock for revenge could kill. Silver Tooth shrugs and gives Broken Nose the remote. The man snatches it from his hand and offers Malcolm a wild menacing look.

All Malcolm can do is watch as the man readies his finger on the button. He takes a harsh breath and flinches when Broken Nose shouts, "HA!". Eyes squeezed and muscles clenched, Malcolm prepares himself for the inevitable pain. It doesn't come. Instead, laughter echoes in the room, forcing him to pry his eyes open. *They're toying with him.*

"Did you want me to press?" Broken Nose taunts. Malcolm opens his mouth and whispers. The words are too low, too pained. Just enough to act as bait.

"What did you say?" Broken Nose asks and walks closer, forgetting to keep his distance—it's so easy to forget when you think you're in power. When the man gets close enough, Malcolm

headbutts him. Both men reel back from the hit, Malcolm leaning back against the wall and Broken Nose howling in pain and spitting insults as his nose starts bleeding again.

Silver Tooth pries the remote from the screaming man and clicks his tongue. “Bad dog, maybe a little shock can adjust this attitude.”

Malcolm falls to his knees first, and as the intensity of the pain increases, he falls to the floor. He tries to school his reactions for the sake of the girls in the room with him, but it feels like his eyes are going to pop out of his sockets, and his world is nothing but pain—pain that doesn’t stop.

His body goes limp when the shock stops. He’s face first on the floor, forehead resting against the cold stone. He feels his eyes fill with tears that fall with the pull of gravity. He doesn’t care that the camera recorded that. The pain is all consuming. He moans as another aftershock shakes his body. He doesn’t know how much more of this he can take before his heart fails.

“In case you’re wondering,” Silver Tooth says. “I removed the shock safety on your collar. It means this thing can actually kill you.”

Horror and understanding dawn on Malcolm with this statement. It makes sense why he’s hurting so much more than when they first locked this collar around his neck.

“Now, smile for the camera, Agent.” Silver Tooth says before pressing the button again.



Malcolm lies on the floor, wheezing, chest heaving fast and hard. His ears are ringing, and his entire body feels numb and heavy.

“Get up!” Muscles grabs his hair and forces him to his knees. Malcolm groans and cries out when his broken ankle is jostled. His muscles feel like they’re made of water, and holding himself up without support is impossible. He can’t even keep his head up anymore.

Malcolm has lost count of the times he got shocked. After a while, it was hard to tell if it was a new burst or an aftershock from the old one. His world blurred into buzzing electricity and pain that dulled everything in comparison. He tried to lure another one to attack them, but they all kept their distance, the leash kept him in line, and after some time, the pain rendered him completely paralyzed in place.

“He’s barely conscious,” Silver Tooth observes as Malcolm keeps swaying where Muscles holds him. “C’mon agent, where is your energy? Your little friends here are still watching the show. Are you enjoying the show, sweethearts? Is this the hero who’s going to rescue you?”

The girls’ whimpers give Malcolm a burst of energy, and he finds his voice. “Don’t touch them!” he rasps.

“Or what?” the men laugh.

Malcolm stammers—he really doesn’t know what to do or say. The pathetic “You don’t have to do this” is out of his mouth before he can help himself.

“Oh, I really do,” Silver Tooth hisses. “After what you did to us, it’s only fair, don’t you agree?”

Malcolm tries another route. “The FBI knows where we are,” He forces out, trying to sound as confident as possible. But with his broken voice from all the screams ripped out of his throat, it doesn’t come out very convincingly. “Let us go and leave. Run while you can.”

Silver Tooth shrugs. “No one’s coming for you. There is a good deal for you. We found a buyer—someone interested in a kindred spirit. You’ll be gone before the light breaks. The others are getting shipped soon too. It’s over.”

Malcolm hears the girls gasp, finally understanding what’s happening. The delicate sound of their cries turns the men’s heads towards them. Malcolm should have been relieved to have their attention on something else but him for a few moments, but *not the girls*.

“Hey, leave them alone! It’s me you want to focus on,” Malcolm says frantically.

“We are.” Broken Nose says. “Hurting them hurts you.”

“They’re so pretty,” Muscles says hungrily.

A wail escapes Sarah’s lips.

“NO! Stay back!” Emily screams, and it only makes them laugh harder.

Malcolm needs to do something... but *What?* Emily and Sarah’s frantic screams and cries echo in the room as the men observe them with hungry eyes. The hysteria had spread to everyone else in the room. Whimpers and moans rise and fall like an organized orchestra—a symphony of misery.

“Watch carefully,” Muscles snickers above him, his hands still in Malcolm’s hair and the only thing keeping him up.

A distraction!

Malcolm needs a distraction. He closes his eyes, gathers what’s left of his courage, says his mental goodbyes to his family, and makes his move.

He twists under the man holding him and brings them both to the ground. His ankle screams in pain, but neither this nor the horrible pull on his skull (due to the man’s grasp on his hair) stops him.

The move was unexpected, and Muscles was unprepared, so it was easy to execute the plan. Now that both of them are on the floor, Malcolm finds the man’s arm and bites down *hard*.

Muscles howls in pain and thrashes, trying to pull his arm out, but Malcolm won't stop. He didn't stop even after he tasted the man's blood in his mouth.

**“GET. HIM. OFF. ME!!”** Muscles wails, and pain flares in Malcolm's side. He gasps from the pain, and Muscles quickly pulls his arm out and away from him. His arm is bleeding profusely, and he's eyeing Malcolm with an intensity fit to kill. Everyone else has stopped and is now looking at them. Faintly, Malcolm notes that his plan was successful.

He doesn't have a chance to celebrate, though, because Muscles takes out his gun and shoves it at Malcolm's temples. “Goodbye Fucker,” he spits. Malcolm closes his eyes, and the world implodes in screams.

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He realizes he's not dead when the sound of screams keep ringing. There is no pain, and the nozzle of Muscles' gun is no longer shoved at his temple.

Malcolm hears the sounds of gunfire and screams of “FBI put your hands in the air.” fill the room. He pries his eyes open and watches in disbelief as the FBI agents storm the room. Silver Tooth, Broken Nose, and the other man are being handcuffed, and Muscles is writhing on the floor, blood oozing from his hand—someone shot him to save Malcolm. An FBI agent is subduing him. More agents are checking on the other victims in the room and getting them out of their chains. Malcolm watches it all happen, and he's not sure if it's real or if he's dead already, and this is just a fantasy.

“Agent Bright?” Someone asks. An FBI woman is leaning over and looking at him.

“Yes,” Malcolm answers, his voice barely a whisper.

“Are you okay? Help is on the way. Hang on with us, okay?” The voice promises him. Malcolm stares stupidly at the woman for a few seconds and then nods slowly.

The FBI found them. This is a dream. It has to be. His eyes keep fluttering, and the effort to keep them open is humongous. Malcolm considers his options: whether he's alive and saved, or he's dead, he can now afford to rest for a while. He lets his eyes close and promptly passes out.

## Chapter 5

## Chapter 5

It's over.

Malcolm can't believe it's actually over. Just thirty minutes ago, he was sure he was going to die here.

But he's not. He's safe.

More importantly, Emily and Sarah are safe.

FBI agents are everywhere, moving around him—doing a ground search and bagging evidence. Malcolm watches them like he's underwater.

Someone holds his arm, and he flinches, at first, recoiling from the touch as if it burns. The hands are off him in an instant, respecting his boundaries. Malcolm realizes with a flash of embarrassment that it's just the paramedic.

*Safe.* He reminds himself.

She hesitantly eyes Malcolm, a cautious expression evident in her eyes. "It's fine," he tells her with a smile—when she still doesn't make any attempt to resume her task—and extends his arm again.

"It's just saline and some pain killers," she explains quietly, and her hands are much slower and careful now. Tentative. Like he's made of glass. He should be embarrassed, but he's too tired to wear his facade of being fine, so he just lies back and lets her work.

The gurney he's lying on is very comfortable, which is saying something about the past few hours where the harsh cold floor was his only option. Oh, the small mercies in life.

He came to when they tried to move him. His foot had sent distress signals to his brain, and he woke up with a cry. He was hooked to a monitor to check his heart functions. Based on the paramedics' facial expressions, he concluded that he wasn't going to die in the next few minutes—which was a massive improvement to his situation already.

They had managed to release his hands from the handcuffs quickly. The collar, on the other hand, was a bit of a trouble. Silver Tooth wouldn't tell them where he kept the key and joked that Malcolm should remain wearing it forever. Malcolm had flushed at the comment but tried to pretend it didn't bother him. They've said worse. After a quick search of the place they found a box full of keys, and thankfully, one of them fit.

Now Malcolm's neck is fully exposed for everyone to see. Angry red and blue lines chase around his throat as burn marks leap out against his pale skin. He has no chance of concealing them. He might have to start a new style at the bureau, maybe bring scarves back into fashion. That or ask Gil where he buys his turtleneck sweaters because he won't be able to stand people staring at his neck.

His foot is still throbbing with a vengeance. The paramedic had mounted it on a soft pillow, but Malcolm knows when they start moving him, it'll hurt again, and he's dreading it.

*But, he forces himself to think optimistically ; all things considered, he's fine.*

He really is. Emily and Sarah are safe. The FBI brought down an entire human trafficking operation, and he is *alive*.

Another case closed.

Big win—worth a broken foot and some burn marks.

The FBI didn't count on bringing down a whole operation, and hence they were short on buses. Malcolm obviously suggested staying behind until everyone else was settled, and despite the paramedics' objections, he got what he wanted. He's the last one here, waiting for another bus to take him to the hospital for treatment. It really wasn't a heroic gesture on his part. He honestly thinks he can stay here and wait. Others need more help. For him, aside from the cast he probably needs for his foot and some prescription creams for his burns, there is really nothing to treat.

Colette Swanson is issuing instructions to two more agents, who nod and leave. She stands alone for a few moments, checking her phone before she turns around and walks over. Malcolm straightens himself as she approaches—the last thing he wants is for her to think of him as weak.

Colette's face is impassive as she reaches him. She looks at Malcolm, her eyes traveling over his injuries, surveying them silently. They linger on his neck, and she purses her lips— *Is she feeling sorry for him?* Malcolm fights the urge to squirm under her gaze and cover his neck from her prying eyes.

Colette sighs and looks back at him. "If we arrived just five minutes later, you would've been dead." Just a statement—it's not caring, nor angry. Just exasperated.

"Yes," he agrees, and his voice is in ruins. Then he asks because his curiosity can't be tamed. "How did you find us?"

"Well, you didn't show up, and I knew there was no way you'd give up a chance to argue with me. Then your neighbor found your door open and blood everywhere, and he called. So, I figured you were probably off doing something careless as usual and got yourself in trouble."

"I didn't—" he starts to say but stops knowing this was futile. "You looked through my notes?"

Her eyes flicker for a second before she quickly hides the look. "Might have had Reynolds look at your notes, but that's not how we found you. Perez found a link between Marcus Henby's office and the emails. That's how I got him to confess."

"I saw Henby yesterday," Malcolm explains. "That's why he sent those men after me."

“Oh?” She says, but somehow Malcolm knows she’s faking it. “Henby never mentioned you.”

*Of course, he wouldn't. That doesn't mean it didn't happen.* Malcolm nods, anyway. They both fall silent for a beat before he rasps out. “Thank you.” And he means it. Despite all their differences and her abject cruelty towards him, he’s very grateful that they rescued him on time.

“Mhm,” Colette hums and walks away without replying. Before Malcolm can relax, she turns and leans so close so when she speaks, he’s the only one who can hear her. “Off the record, I didn’t do it for you, Whitly. You’re always running off and getting in trouble. Half of our department budget is lost every month in trying to fix the messes you keep making. Frankly, I don’t know why the higher-ups haven’t fired you yet, but I’m really hoping it happens soon. And did you ever hear about calling for backup?”

Malcolm’s face flushes despite his best efforts. He really thought he could handle her, but apparently not. “I didn’t run off anywhere. They *attacked* me in my home. I had it under control, at first—”

“Clearly.” she cuts him off.

“And I was going to call for backup, but I didn’t know there was a third man, and—”

“Save it, agent. I don't want to hear it. I am so grateful we were able to save the two girls and bring down this operation. I did that, no thanks to you. Your insubordination and incompetence just caused us more trouble and paperwork. Going off on your own like some sort of vigilante is not the right way to do things.”

“I didn’t go off on my own!” Malcolm hisses. “And, *my profile* was right! I led you to the girls. If you had listened to me, none of this would have happened.”

“You got lucky with the profile. Then you almost got yourself and the girls killed. Be grateful I won’t be filing a formal complaint against you for reckless endangerment.”

“That’s not true, and you know it,” he grits out.

“Mr. Bright, we’re ready to move.” the paramedic says, interrupting the conversation. Surprised, Malcolm turns towards the sound; he forgot that the paramedic was still there.

Colette clears her throat. “I have to leave,” she says. “Unlike you, I have a crime scene to process.”

She walks off, and Malcolm bites his tongue so he doesn’t call out for her again. It’s just Colette, he tells himself. She’s just bitter because his profile was right. Her words don’t matter. This time, it really wasn’t his fault.

Another paramedic helps in loading his gurney into the ambulance car. They place an oxygen mask over his face, and instantly Malcolm tries to pry it off.

“It’s just a muscle relaxer, Mr. Bright.” The paramedic explains. “Try to relax, sleep if you can. We won’t be long until we reach the hospital.”

Malcolm wants to argue, but he suddenly feels so worn down. Maybe it’s not a bad idea to sit back and relax.

Malcolm accepts the mask and lays back. He closes his eyes and tries to forget. He tries to forget the past day’s events—the pain, the humiliation, the fear, and the helplessness. Malcolm closes his eyes against Colette’s hateful words. He closes his eyes and tries to picture Emily and Sarah going home again, along with the dozen other girls who were trapped there. He closes his eyes because, unlike thirty minutes ago, Malcolm knows there is going to be a tomorrow, and he’s going to see his family again.

So, Malcolm closes his eyes and drifts off, knowing that this time, he is safe.



## Epilogue

When Malcolm wakes up, he's alone. The silence of his room is interrupted by the sound of the hospital monitoring machine beeping. A constant beep... beep sound. A proof that his heart is beating—that he is alive.

The paramedics had promised they won't sedate him, and yet he feels slow and disoriented. It's a feeling he knows all too well. Luckily for him, he didn't have any dreams. He just woke up naturally... drifting easily into consciousness. It was a foreign feeling—one that he really liked.

He's sitting comfortably in his bed, nestled nicely between soft pillows. His broken foot, in a cast now, is mounted on another pad, elevated to keep the pressure *or something*? He doesn't really know. The pain is definitely better, but he can still feel it throbbing dully. Malcolm eyes the cast warily—he's going to be put on desk duty for some time. He's not too thrilled about that.

The room is dim, curtains draped over the window where he can just make out the street light. Outside his room, he sees that the corridors are quiet. If he has to guess, it's probably still night... or maybe early dawn. After a quick survey of his surroundings, he finds his clothes (or what's left of them) neatly folded on the chair next to him. On top of his clothes, he can see an evidence bag containing *his phone*?

Malcolm tries to get up to reach for it, but the move sets up a series of minor explosions everywhere. He groans and stops trying... just lies still. To say that he's in pain would be an understatement. Malcolm feels like someone has broken every bone in his body—every part of him aches. He can't move his head without eliciting a stab of pain behind his eyes.

Unable to tolerate the jabs of pain, Malcolm avoids fidgeting and just focuses on breathing. He closes his eyes and takes in slow, calming breaths. It almost feels like he's at home. Meditating on his yoga mat.

*Almost.* Because he still can't get the sound of the traffickers' laughs out of his mind and the helplessness he felt at the time. Part of him still fears he'll wake up and find himself at their mercy again, bound, collared, and tortured for their amusement.

Malcolm tries to cast his mind away, to think of something else to counteract the growing sense of panic creeping up on him. He's so hellbent on his task that when the nurse enters, pushing the door, he flinches violently. Unable to contain his fear, or calm his mind, Malcolm's heart rate spikes, and the monitor starts screaming.

He shoots out of bed, pains forgotten, and looks around, trying to pinpoint the source of danger. His eyes are blown wide with the adrenaline that's coursing through his veins, preparing him for yet another battle.

One that doesn't exist because he's safe. And Malcolm knows that—he knows he's not in danger anymore—*theoretically*, his mind knows. His body doesn't, though. He's been so

tense during his kidnapping, always on edge, still planning to attack, that his reaction right now was just muscle memory. Without his approval, his body took certain measures to protect him.

It takes the nurse a few moments before she reacts, hurrying to his bed and trying to assure him that he's okay... that he made it out. Malcolm forces himself to listen to her voice, to focus on it to ground himself.

Malcolm closes his eyes and wills himself to relax. In ... and out. In... and out. One breath at a time... until he feels a bit in control... until the loud monitors fall back to their monotonous beeping.

When he feels confident enough to open his eyes again, he sees the nurse standing a few feet away, her hands held up in mock surrender. "I'm sorry," she blurts out, guilt shining through her eyes. "I didn't mean to scare you."

Malcolm looks at her. She's young... *probably an intern?* A quick glimpse at her ID card confirms his suspicions. She's still new at this—that's why she was freaking out over his reaction. Granted, not all hospital patients have panic attacks when people enter their room, but the way she was acting... the lost look on her face, suggests that he is her first patient.

Malcolm musters a friendly smile.

"I'm fine," he says. "Don't worry about what just happened. Things are still a bit tense."

And it feels like his throat is grating against broken glass. The nurse is by his side in a second, holding a glass of water to his lips. Malcolm relishes the feeling of cool water in his mouth, and as it travels down his throat, he lets out a satisfied hum. He gives her a grateful look. "Thank you," Malcolm tells her, feeling better already.

She nods, still eyeing him warily. "You weren't supposed to be up yet. After what you went through—"

"Oh, it's nothing," Malcolm cuts her off. "Also, I have a high tolerance to meds. They don't affect me as they do other people."

She nods again, and this time he detects the hints of the poorly concealed pity she's feeling towards him. The nurse clears her throat and starts to look at his monitor, taking notes of his vitals.

"Are you feeling sick?" she asks and marks down on her notebook when Malcolm shakes his head to all her questions. "Difficulty breathing? Can you see clearly? Both eyes? Mmm, do you feel any burning around your neck? What about your foot? No pain there?"

She frowns. "Are you lying so you can get discharged?"

Malcolm gives her his most innocent smile and lies. "Of course not. I'm fine, really."

"On a scale of 1 to 10, can you rate the intensity of the pain you're feeling now?"

Ahh. A trick question. If he says a low number, he will look like he's lying, and if he goes high, he was lying before.

When Malcolm says nothing, she smirks. He settles for telling her the truth. "Eleven," he admits.

"Mmhmm," she notes down. "Dr. Anderson is going to do his rounds in an hour. He should advise on your medication. Meanwhile, I'm authorized to increase your painkiller dose. Would you like that?"

"Yes, please," Malcolm sighs. "Thank you."

The nurse works on his IV drip, and Malcolm feels the effect of the painkillers almost instantly. To be truthful, he has been feeling like his body was still buzzing from the residual current of the shocks he got from that collar. Now that feeling was numbed out completely, and he is grateful.

"Feeling better?" she observes, and he wonders if the signs of pain on his face weren't as concealed as he thought.

He nods and melts back in his pillow.

"Anything else I can help you with, Agent Bright?"

"Yes." There is a nagging question, one he knows the answer to but still hopes he's wrong... Wants to be wrong... Because how else is this evidence bag here? Malcolm swallows and asks, "Did anyone come to see me? Umm, while I was here at all?"

He knows the answer before she replies. The nurse avoids eye contact immediately and presses her lips. "Umm, I'm sorry, but no one has. Do you want me to call someone for you?"

Being new to this, he can tell that she feels sorry for him, and Malcolm can see why. The man before her was kidnapped and tortured, and his room was empty. No visitors, no one asking about him. All alone in a hospital room.

"It's okay," he tells her, and it's laughable that he's the one consoling her. "I don't have many friends here. I didn't call my family either. Didn't want to worry them. I was just wondering because..." he trails, and she follows his eyes to the evidence bag.

"Oh!" she exclaims. "Actually, yes! One of the detectives brought it in. Said to tell you, it's been buzzing like crazy in the evidence hold." The nurse moves to the chair beside his bed and hands him his phone. She then makes her way to the door. "If you need anything else, please use the buzzer."

"Are the others okay?" Malcolm suddenly remembers. *How did he forget to ask about that the second she came in?* "Those admitted here as well?" he clarifies.

The nurse knits her eyebrows. "I can't disclose information about the other patients." She cites firmly.

“Yeah, I guess so,” Malcolm sighs.

“But...I can tell you that they’re all alive,” she offers him a kind smile. “You should get back to sleep.”

“Sleep’s not really my thing,” Malcolm tells her. “Thank you, umm...”

“Christine,” The nurse smiles. “Good night, Mr. Bright.”

Malcolm watches her walk away, and then he checks his phone. It’s a miracle the traffickers didn’t just smash it. He finds seven missed calls from his mother and three texts. There are also two texts from his sister. There are no messages from Gil, but that’s not odd. It’s been two days since he disappeared, and he checks in with Gil weekly.

Malcolm opens those from his mom first, and he almost laughs—because what else did he expect.

— Malcolm, I know you’re ignoring my calls. Answer me now!

— Malcolm Whitly! You will answer that phone right now, or I will send Adolpho to bring you back by force. This gala is important to me. You promised you’ll be there. But, of course, why care about the promise you made to your mother when you’d rather get involved in all that death and murder stuff that you do.

And the third one was sent the next day.

— At least let me know you’re ok?

Malcolm shoots her an apology text about getting trapped inside a case and losing his phone. That should abate her anger without actually telling her the truth. If she knew, he wouldn’t hear the end of it. Ainsley’s texts are similar. Complaining about their mother, and another angry with him because she got dragged into attending the gala in his place.

Malcolm feels conflicted as he reads those messages. Some part of him feels a pang of hurt, a heavy lump in his throat. He almost died, and he is vulnerable and alone. He wanted to find something different in there—proof that they care. Yet another part of him is more than grateful that they’re not worried sick about him and that they assumed he’s just ignoring them. He’s happy that they will know he got kidnapped.

And in that sense, those messages make him feel like everything is alright.

He should check up on Gil, though. As if on cue, Malcolm’s phone buzzes. A new text from Gil.

— Hey there, city boy. Things have been quite busy at work those past three days. The NYPD caught a major case. Had your name all over it. You can tell since I’m up at 4 AM!

Malcolm smiles and texts him back.

— Oh, what deviant thing has the city produced this time? New York never ceases to surprise me.

— Maybe the next time you visit, we can go over the case specifics? Heard the feds solved the Brady girls case! Gotta admit it hurt to not learn from you first.

— Things got out of hand. The usual. I'm okay, though, don't worry!

And, of course, his phone starts ringing right away. Malcolm knows he's screwed because he sounds terrible. Gil will see through his charade in an instant.

"Bright! What did you do? Are you okay? Should I come down there?" Gil's worried voice comes through the phone, firing each question after the other without waiting for Malcolm's answers.

And there is something so oddly comforting in hearing his voice. It fills Malcolm with the warmth he didn't know he needed. The warmth he lacks in his life here with the FBI where he only gets cold stares and frozen attitudes.

Malcolm finds himself relaxing in his bed. "I'm good, Gil!" He says quietly, so he doesn't reveal the extent of his voice damage. "You don't have to worry about me."

"It's my job to worry about you, kid. You don't sound fine at all. Are you in the hospital? Does your mother know?"

"Yes, and no! Mother doesn't need to know. It was nothing, really. Just got in a scuffle with the kidnappers."

"Were you shot?" Gil interrogates him.

"No."

"Did someone stab you?"

"No, no! No one did." Malcolm blesses his lucky star that Gil will never guess what happened—which makes it perfect for lying. "See, nothing major happened. Just a couple of bruises. I broke my ankle, too. But... I'm getting discharged tomorrow."

There is a tense silence, and Malcolm wonders if Gil believes him.

"Is there someone with you? Your partner... what's his name? Umm yeah. Is Jacobs with you?"

Malcolm swallows, and he hates himself for lying so much. In truth, Jacobs is no longer his partner. The man lasted a full month before asking for a transfer, but Malcolm didn't tell Gil about it. He also knows that if Gil figures out he is sitting alone in the hospital, he'll be here in a matter of hours. *Lying is essential*.

"Yeah, he's with me. Keeping an eye out." He says weakly and then changes the subject.

"You doing okay? Also... You should sleep, Gil. Your body's not used to the lack of sleep. It

takes practice!”

“You’re right on that account,” Gil laughs, then his voice is somber when he continues. “ My hunch is telling me that something feels off. But I also know you won’t lie to me. That right?”

“Of course!” Malcolm replies quickly.

Gil is silent again for a few moments, and Malcolm wonders if he’ll call him out on his lies. Instead, the older man sighs.

“Okay... I’ll check up on you tomorrow. Get some sleep, Kid. If you can..”



## The following day

Malcolm discharges himself AMA. The attending physician (Dr. Anderson) is appalled when he hears that decision and strongly advises against it. He tries to sway his patient to stay by making a strong case of wanting to check on Malcolm's heart functions after so many shocks and explaining that his heart might still fail if he wasn't monitored. It's a strong case that might have worked if the patient wasn't stubborn and lacking in the self-preservation category.

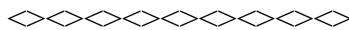
Grudgingly, they let Malcolm go after giving him a long list of prescriptions—painkillers, soothing creams for his neck, as well as lozenges for his throat. Malcolm accepts the prescription note with a polite smile, listens to their many lectures and rules that keep coming, and pays his bill and leaves.

As expected, no one is there to lend him a ride back home. Agent Reynolds had sent him a 'get well soon' text, and it was nice of her. No one else bothered—which was fine.

Malcolm has learned to manage his expectations with his colleagues at work. They think he's reckless and behaves wildly and erratically—which means they won't keep wasting their time running after The Surgeon's psycho son to the hospital every other case. A few had the first few times out of duty, but when it looked like it'll be a habit, they soon stopped.

Oh, he actually *got* another message—from his boss. He's saying that Colette had filled him in on what happened and that they need to "talk" when he's feeling good enough to come back. This doesn't inspire any good feels either. Malcolm wonders what truths Colette had painted to make his kidnapping 100% his fault.

It's a thought for another day, though. For now, he needs a distraction. Before he goes home, Malcolm decides to take a little detour.



Malcolm never realized that there are forty-two steps separating his loft from the ground floor. Usually, he takes them in no time, skipping a couple of steps at a time, his mind occupied with other cases or whatnot.

Today, however, as he leans on the wall to get up the stairs, one hand gripping the rails for dear life and a birdcage in his other hand, Malcolm realizes that they're just too many steps.

*It's a very long way up.*

He had to leave his crutches behind so he could escort his new guest first. He'll have to make another trip down and up the stairs to retrieve them.

He finally got himself a little bird—a small parakeet. Sunshine. She'd called to him the second he saw her, and he knew she was the one. Sunshine keeps chirping excitedly as if she understands she's got a new home, and it's maybe the only thing that makes this journey up the stairs tolerable.

He's a gasping mess when he finally makes it to the door. There is a crime scene tape covering it.

A second's horror grips his heart as he realizes that *FBI agents* were in his place. That this was an active crime scene. The color drains from his face when he realizes that they've all seen his bed restraints. They've seen his home, know that the son of the serial killer shackles himself to his bed every night. The thought almost makes him want to throw up. He doesn't need more reasons for them to think of him as a freak.

Too late now.

Malcolm removes the crime scene tape at the door and lets himself in.

The loft is a mess.

There is broken glass from his fight with Silver Tooth and Muscles. There is also a trail of blood which he assumes belongs to him... from when they dragged him after he lost consciousness. Malcolm sighs. He will have to call someone in to clean this up—that's a job for later, though.

Feeling a bit faint from his journey up the stairs, Malcolm makes his way to the sofa. Maybe he can hold off on that trip to get his crutches. It's not like he'll be doing much walking around the loft.

A few envelopes were waiting for him when he arrived. Malcolm fishes them out of his pocket and glances at the sending addresses. Nothing really grips his attention so, he throws them on the side in favor of checking his phone next.

He has no new messages from Gil. The older man hasn't called him back either. Malcolm knows what that means. He wasn't convincing enough last night, and the older man was coming to check on him himself.

He hates that Gil has to do that when he's caught up in his major case. He also knows what the lieutenant will do. Gil will probably have the case files with him and ask for Malcolm's opinion on the case—that way, he will have an argument when Malcolm calls him out for coming all this way just to check up on him. The thought makes Malcolm smile. The older man was everything that his father wasn't...

Sunshine's chirping grabs Malcolm's attention. The little bird singing in her cage, and her voice are just so therapeutic. It warms Malcolm's heart.

"Welcome home, Sunshine." He tells the little parakeet, and she flaps her wings and chirps in response. It's as if she understands what he's saying. He chuckles while he watches her and feels so light. It's a feeling he hasn't experienced in a long time.

“Do you want to stretch out your wings?” He asks. “The place’s usually better than this, but you can have your tour.” Malcolm opens the cage, and she soars around the room.

Malcolm watches her fly and enjoys just how free she looks. He holds out his hand, remembering how Jackie does it, and Sunshine makes her way to it, stands on his finger. He pets her head affectionately and sighs. She’s so pretty.

He’s so lost in the serenity of this moment that for a second, he forgets about the case, the kidnappers, and the pain of the past few days.

“We’re gonna be okay.” He smiles at her.

This time, he thinks it might actually not be a lie.

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