



LET THE EASTER HUNT

KITTY THOMAS

THE EASTER HUNT

BRIAN AND MINA'S HOLIDAY HITS: BOOK 1

KITTY THOMAS

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Digital Edition**

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MINA

“I can’t believe you paid so much money for this *gaijin* whore.” Matsumoto’s lackey walks around me in a slow circle as though he’s in any position to judge me, his laughter ringing in my ears. I jump as the whip slices through the air behind me, making that sharp cracking sound.

And then I wake up.

My hand goes immediately to Brian’s collar around my throat. It steadies me and reminds me I’m safe.

It’s a short dream—like the one where you’re just drifting off and dream you tripped on something, and your body jerks. I always wake right at the point before the damage starts. I don’t know if it’s my mind protecting me from the event, but I always hear that whip moving through the air. I’m always bracing for that first horrible sting, but it never comes. Instead, I find myself in the room I share with Brian in the dungeons of the Pleasure House.

I’m still so grateful he got to me in time, before Matsumoto had me long enough to give me more permanent scars. And Brian knew just how to tend to my wounds so they’d heal with minimal physical reminders.

I don’t feel any lingering fear when I wake from these dreams. Mostly I feel anger. It’s a boiling rage I feel I can no longer contain, as if some sort of beast lives inside me and is hungry for someone’s blood that isn’t my own. I unconsciously reach for Brian, but I keep forgetting he isn’t here.

I glance over at the alarm clock. It’s almost noon. I can’t have breakfast unless I make it myself, but the cafeteria should be serving lunch by now, and definitely by the time I manage to drag myself out of bed and upstairs. It’s a process. I’ve been sleeping poorly the past few nights, and there aren’t exactly any windows down here to alert me to the arrival of the sun.

I have zero discipline without Brian. He’s off on a job, and I know it’s not for the house. It’s for his personal demons, no doubt. I don’t know if he’ll dispose of the body on site when he’s done or if he’ll bring it here to incinerate. It really depends on his mood. When he’s all covered in blood looking like an even more insane Dexter with trash bags filled with body parts, it does strike the terror he’s looking for in the residents of the house.

It causes everyone to give him a wide berth, which is pretty much what he prefers. Brian, like me, has trust issues.

I’m the only one who sees underneath the monster to the man who saved me, the man who has been hurt as I have been hurt. And something has flipped over in me as well. It’s like a trigger buried deep inside me. I tried to ignore it. I tried to brush it away and be the good girl, but underneath it all

there was a darkness that began to take root, a slithering dark smoke swirling around my soul.

After Japan, everything cracked open, and all the dark smoke that had only been seeping through the small cracks within me were finally free. I'm no longer afraid of Brian. I'm afraid of myself, my own darkness. I have long vivid violent dreams now—not violence where I'm the victim, violence where I'm the perpetrator. Every time Brian goes on a job I want to go with him, but he says it's too dangerous, he can't risk me, but I have a growing need to do damage.

This feeling festers more and more, like an itch I can't scratch, and I'm starting to resent him keeping the carnage to himself as though he's hoarding necessary supplies for my survival—like he's hoarding oxygen. Is he truly worried about my safety or does he want to protect that last shade of innocence that remains in me? It's one thing to be a victim and have a traumatic past. It's another thing to then become the thing of nightmares yourself, to inflict the trauma. To be the monster.

I look the other way when Brian punishes girls in the house and when he kills, whether it's to enforce house rules and the secrecy this illicit business requires, or if it's personal jobs, personal vendettas—personal trash he feels should be taken out. I'm not sure if he gets paid for these side job hits, or if it's pro bono assassination, but... we both know either way he doesn't need the money and money isn't what drives him. It's blood and begging. It's him having the power and no longer being that scared abused little boy.

It's like how he runs on the treadmill in the middle of the night... not for fitness, but running from his ghosts and the dark awful childhood only I and the house shrink know about, the scars on his back so like mine that only I have been trusted to see. It doesn't make what he does most of the time okay, but I understand. And sometimes his kills are needed. To protect someone. To protect me.

Last year he threw me aside and I left, walking into what I thought was a free world, looking over my shoulder the whole time wondering where Brian was and if he'd just forgotten me, wondering if any part of his heart beat for me or *could* beat for me. During this time, I was stolen off the street by a man called Matsumoto. I was never clear on if that was his first name or his last name or if he had only one. I was taken to the other side of the world where he took out his sadism on me—all because Brian had kept me from him.

I thought I'd die there and that Brian either didn't know or didn't care. I wish I'd been conscious when he strode in like an avenging dark angel. I imagine him with two guns in his hands, taking out every soul that stood between him and me. And I'm ninety percent sure that's at least close to how it went down.

When he leaves me behind to rescue, protect, enforce house rules, take out his rage, outrun his demons or fight back against them, I feel alone.

I'm not truly alone, of course. There's an entire world upstairs teeming with life in what I think of as The Pleasure House. All the trainers—unnaturally attractive men, and all the girls seeking to be trained—similar in their unnatural beauty. Oh yes, the women all came here voluntarily. They have some deeper inner kink that they feel can't be met with play pretend kink. I was foolish and hopeful like them once, too.

They want it to be real. They want to truly be owned. I sometimes wonder if they are as damaged as me. Is that what drives this desire? Or is it the comfort and safety of not needing to make a million decisions in such an uncertain world? Or wanting someone else to take care of them or be responsible?

Or is it the sheer hedonism of being someone's pleasure toy, knowing these buyers are so well screened that anyone you go to is very likely to be very well versed in the art not only of receiving, but in giving pleasure, and that you will receive the full force of that lust and desire. And you belong

to them...you signed away all your rights so... you have no choice but to submit and experience and express your desires. You can't be blamed for anything. You're the victim here, so you may as well enjoy the fall.

But are we victims? I honestly don't know anymore, the lines are so blurred. But I don't feel like a victim. The most dangerous and feared man at this house—the only true actual psycho makes me feel more safe than I've ever felt in my life because I know nothing will ever stand between Brian and me. If I'm in danger, someone is dying. And if Brian has anything to say about it, it won't be me.

The girls at the house are all transient. Once they find their forever homes—like so many puppies at the pound—they're gone forever as new women drift in to be trained.

Then there are the lifers... First there are the owners who also double as trainers: Lindsay—that's a man and also the house shrink, Gabe—the nice one, Anton—the Russian massage therapist and seducer of women with his magic hands, and Brian—the wounded dangerous one. There was another guy who was asked to be a part of all this, Michael, but he opted out. Probably for the best. It's kind of like the mafia around here. Once you choose to be *in*, you never get to choose to be out. Mutual assured destruction makes for greater criminal safety after all.

Then there's Phyllis in the kitchen. She's an older woman, maybe mid to late fifties. She downplays her looks, and who can blame her? Even though she's past the average shelf life of what these men sell and trade, one can never be too careful. And besides, Lindsay is around her age. And then there's the cougar phenomenon. You never know if one of these young trainers is going to develop an older woman fetish, so she's probably smart to downplay, but I can see the beauty she hides.

Phyllis was the real estate agent who sold this place to the guys as they were building their illegal and morally bankrupt business to match wealthy powerful men with women who long to serve them and live out all their greatest filthy fantasies. She saw too much, and so now she's in charge of the kitchen.

There's a girl named Shannon who I mostly avoid. She's sweet but maybe even more damaged than me. She has bad scars, including some on her shoulders and one on her face. The worst thing about the scars is that Brian gave them to her. I can't let myself ever think about it.

He's not like that with me. I never fear or even think he could ever be like that with me, but Shannon is the one person in the house who reminds me who Brian really is. Even when he's covered in blood from a fresh kill. Even when there are garbage bags full of body parts to incinerate, nothing drives home what he's capable of like looking at Shannon.

She came to the house, like me, in search of the kinky fairy tale. She, like me, bought all the marketing hype delivered by Lindsay. Lindsay failed her, just as he failed me. No one warned her about Brian, she smarted off to him on one of his dark days, and... the rest is etched into her skin for the rest of her life. They couldn't let her go. Lindsay spared her life, but now she's got a very different kind of slavery, and not the pleasurable kinky kind. She basically runs the on-site spa, much more half-heartedly than Phyllis runs the kitchen.

It's so hard to hold in my head the fact that Brian could hurt someone the way he hurt Shannon, that he can be her literal nightmare at the same time he's my salvation. So, to keep my sanity in check, I avoid her as much as possible.

The last lifer, besides me, is Annette. She's with Anton. Gabe had some fixation with a girl named Julie, but decided to leave her alone, so now he's just moping around the house like a sad country song.

I sigh and finally drag myself out of bed. I can complain about the lack of windows down here all

day long, but it's like a cozy cave, and Brian is the master of comfortable bedding. You wouldn't think a man—much less a man like Brian—would be concerned about that, or even know the first thing about it, but when you have trouble sleeping like he does, I guess every bit of comfort counts for something.

It took until I got back to the house to really start to appreciate Brian's understanding of thread count. He's a complex guy.

I take a quick shower, put my long chocolate brown hair up in a messy up-do and throw on some leggings, casual boots, and a sweater that hangs half off one shoulder. The leggings-aren't-pants crowd can kiss my ass.

When I get up to the cafeteria, lunch is being served. Phyllis excels at lunch. There's a bizarre way in which Phyllis is sort of living out her dream life. She hated real estate. She was more-or-less self-employed but was trying to ease out of it. All she really wanted was to start a catering company. This woman loves to cook and bake like nobody I've ever seen.

Maybe she isn't building an empire but she also doesn't have the stress of business failure. It's a trade-off. The guys at the house give her a huge allowance for anything she needs for the kitchen as well as a personal allowance and she just gets to cook and bake anything she wants. Sometimes she enlists help from others here when she's planning something really labor intensive.

There's a wide variety of sub sandwiches today, and I momentarily wonder if it might be some kind of inside joke or attempted pun. There's also a few plugged in panini sandwich machines which have become quite popular with an array of things to choose to put on them.

My favorite lately is turkey with a spinach artichoke spread she makes melted together with provolone cheese. If it weren't for the gym here, I wouldn't be flaunting the *leggings aren't pants* code.

The girls give me a lot of space, and it hurts my feelings a little. Even Annette is cautious around me now. I've been back at the house for a while but I can't hide the darkness that has become suddenly very loud. I'm sure people can feel the energy of it. Where before I was a scared and traumatized woman—a small girl in a grown-up body in many ways—now there is an anger, a hardness, a power waiting to unfurl.

It scares me sometimes, so I don't blame the others for their reactions to me. I feel as though I really could snap at any moment and do something crazy. Even the trainers are cautious in my space. The only person who isn't on some level afraid of me now is Brian. But maybe it's pity they all feel, not fear. After all they must have some idea of what Matsumoto did to me.

And I have thrown my weight around with the girls a bit. I've smacked a couple and yelled at a couple more since I've been back, but it's only because they had comments to make about my mostly Queen of the Damned clothes, and how they don't like that I call everybody but Brian by their first names around here. I saw the look Brian got in his eyes. While I may stay out of his way, it still bothers me that he'd hurt one of the girls over something minor having to do with me. So when these moments come, I take them into my own hands, to protect them. From him. But I'm sure they don't see it that way. The girls who've been here longer understand the Brian threat, but the new ones often don't. And I just can't let another Shannon happen on my watch. Not because of me.

I make my favorite panini and sit at a table away from the others. Annette makes eye contact as she fixes her plate. I want her to come sit with me, but I can't bring myself to call her over. We'd been starting to form a friendship before everything happened. Since then she's been polite but wary. Lindsay approaches my table, and I flinch. He's probably the only person at the house I still have a visceral unpleasant reaction to. There are things neither I nor Brian will ever forgive him for.

“Mina, do you know where Brian is? I need him.”

If anyone needs Brian it's because they want him to do something unsavory and evil which they can't bring themselves to sully their own souls or hands with. Punish a girl. Kill someone on the outside who has become a threat to the house. Something like that.

“He's on personal business,” I say. “And he's been gone longer than he should be. I'm worried.”

Lindsay rolls his eyes at this, like I'm expressing concern over a rabid dog. Nobody cares about how Brian feels. He's a monster, so he has no feelings. It doesn't occur to anybody that Brian might need anything from someone else. Lindsay was supposed to be his therapist—though that's over. Lindsay was also once my therapist, and really this guy should lose his license.

“I mean it! I'm worried something's gone wrong. He's been gone a week longer than he said he would.”

Normally if he's a day or two late, it's fine. It happens. But this long? I'm afraid something happened. I'm afraid he might be hurt. Or dead. He doesn't communicate with the house when he's out on a job for security reasons, but, it's been too long. Deep down I know this.

“Maybe he's just got a lover on the side,” Lindsay says.

He thinks this kind of barb will affect me. It won't. Brian and I don't have intercourse. I know that's weird but I don't like doing it. Besides my traumatic experiences in the kink world even before all this, I've never really been able to get off on that particular activity. And for Brian, fucking isn't a compliment, so no, Brian doesn't have a lover. He and I definitely bring each other pleasure—yes the sexual kind—but he can't fuck without it being an act of aggression and I can't be fucked for similar and also different reasons.

The kind of intimacy we share requires a vulnerability Brian won't and can't show with anyone else. *So nice try, psycho-shrink*. Brian does occasionally fuck the women he punishes, but I don't consider that cheating. My position with him and what we share is much different. I wouldn't prefer to be in their place. Most women wouldn't understand this, but if you'd met Brian, you'd know there's nothing to be jealous about.

Lindsay hates that I'm not required to show any deference or respect to anyone at the house but Brian, and so he intentionally tries to get under my skin with petty bullshit like this. Annette calls all the other trainers *Sir*, and acts like the good proper submissive pretty much all the time, but Brian is the only person I answer to in any way. He made that very clear. And Lindsay can't stand that I speak to him as though we're equals. We aren't equals. I'm about a thousand times better than the house shrink. And we both know it.

“Well, Lindsay, if you aren't going to care about Brian and where he might be and if he might need some sort of help, I'm not sure how he can help you.”

He rolls his eyes, turns on his heel, and leaves the cafeteria. Seriously, fuck that guy.

“You've got a letter.”

I turn to find Gabe, holding out a piece of mail to me.

“Thank you.” I take the letter from him discreetly and place it under my plate while I eat lunch.

He gives me a strange look but shrugs and walks away. I'm grateful it's Gabe who gets the mail, and not one of the other owners. Lindsay would have opened it himself and possibly withheld it from me entirely.

I don't get letters. Who would send me mail here? Who knows I'm here to send me mail in the first place? My heart flutters in my chest. Is it from Brian? It has to be. He's the only person who has my mailing address. But why the hell would he send me a letter to the house? Is he in some kind of trouble? But again, why a letter? Letters are too slow for trouble. If he needed something couldn't he

just break his calling rule once? Why not just use a burner phone, make the call quick, and then dispose of it?

My fingers itch to rip into the envelope, but I can't do it at the table with so many eyes on me. So I act like it's nothing. I eat the Turkey and spinach panini, barely tasting it, take my plate back, and rush downstairs so I can open it in private.

BRIAN

Four days ago.

WHEN THE HOUSE doesn't have any trash they need taken out, and when the darkness comes over me too strongly to sleep at all, when it starts affecting my functioning out in the world, that's when I go on personal jobs.

I usually do private contracts, but when I don't have a dossier and a due date on anyone, I *give back to the world* by choosing the most revolting piece of shit I can find, someone who is also a logistical challenge. Solving life-or-death puzzles is one of the many tactics I've come up with to help me function semi-normally in life.

I happen to have a contract at the moment, and the money on this one is one of the highest I've taken. Two million dollars. Just to kill someone. When the money is high, I'm either dealing with a potential heiress with a vendetta against her husband and a personal allowance she's willing to risk to get the full jackpot, or a challenge. Someone so hard and dangerous to kill that the money has to be a big enough lure for the risk.

I don't worry about guilt or innocence. Partly because I don't care, but also because, generally speaking, if someone puts a big price on your head, you did something to deserve it. But it's not always true. I didn't used to care about this, but ever since Mina, I've been turning down jobs here and there. I've become a little more selective. As a result, word has gotten out that I might not take a job, and the offers have gotten bigger as a result. I've suddenly become the prom queen with an overflowing dance card.

I have no real need for this money, but I collect it and faithfully deposit it into my offshore accounts anyway.

I tell myself I turn down jobs because I don't have the time. I have Mina to think of. Or I pretend maybe the job is too dangerous, and how would Mina cope at the house without me? And what if they tried to sell her to someone else who might hurt her?

But I know that's a lie. It's true that I don't care about the people one way or the other, but I care about her. It matters to me that she thinks there's something in me worth saving.

Every day I watch her grow darker and darker from exposure to me, like I'm a pathogen infecting her blood, choking out everything that is light and pure and good. I want her to stay in a kind of

innocence and goodness for me. When I saw the glimpse of her darker edge, I thought I wanted that, but now I'm afraid it'll suck us both under. I want her to be like both of us before either of us was broken.

I'm staking out my latest target's house, learning his routine. It's the most boring part of the job, but the one that ensures my safety from the law and any surprises that could result in my untimely death. Of course the surprises I'm looking for are those to do with the target or his security detail.

It's why I'm caught off guard by the unaccounted for person and the pungent smell that surprises me then turns my world to darkness.

When I wake, there's a black cloth bag over my head and I'm bound to a chair.

Great.

I assume my captor saw my breathing change, because I'm only conscious for a few minutes before the cloth is ripped away. It takes me a moment to adjust to the single bright bare bulb hanging down way too close.

"Sloan," the man spits out my last name. "We have unfinished business."

I squint at the Japanese man. No. I can't be seeing Matsumoto. I killed him. Matsumoto was one of the original bidders for Mina. She was too broken, her contract had too many limitations, and here this piece of shit was bidding far higher than seemed right to me, given those circumstances.

I knew her brokenness appealed to him, and something in my gut said he wanted to do more damage. I bought her instead—my first heroic act in life—and Matsumoto never forgave me for taking away his toy when it was within his grasp. Later when I'd foolishly set her free, he'd been waiting to make sure she paid for it.

But when I went to Japan to bring her back, I *know* I killed that motherfucker. Maybe I should have shot him before I lit the match, but my sadism demanded the satisfaction of knowing he suffered, that it wasn't a quick, easy death. Was there some servant I missed? Someone who untied him before I could get Mina to safety and start the blaze? Was there a secret sub basement? Tunnels that offered escape?

"What's the matter Sloan? You look like you've seen a ghost."

He chuckles, oh so amused. I finally let go of the breath I've been holding, because I've just realized this isn't Matsumoto. It's his son.

Fuck.

I'm not the guy who does loose ends. But let's face it, it was clear enough who'd come to clean house, and I should have taken the son of Japan's most notorious crime boss into account that night. I should have verified where he was and hunted him before he could hunt me. But I was so laser-focused on getting Mina out of there, on ensuring to myself she was still alive, that it didn't occur to me the son was missing from the house when I went on my raid and burn mission.

I've gotten in a few tight spots before, times when I could have died, even once where I got captured and escaped. But back then it was only my own life in peril. And I've never really cared that much about that. If I'm dead, my nightmares stop because they live in me. When I'm gone, they're gone. And maybe the world is a better place.

I never had someone else I had to worry about. Now all I can think about is: *if I don't survive this, if I don't get back to her, what will happen to Mina?* Will the house sell her? Lindsay is just dying to take her out from under my protection. That sick son of a bitch. If I don't come back to the house, he could get rid of her and make a profit.

The bar is high for what I consider to be a *sick son of a bitch*, given my own dark proclivities, but Lindsay is the worst kind of dangerous. He's Good Guy Dangerous. He's the hero trying to save

the world who puts people around him in danger because the mission is all that matters.

The guy who really believes he's doing the right thing—most of the time, anyway. The guy who thinks he's doing something for some altruistic greater good. If you ask me, society is only as fucked up as it currently is due to the morality of self-sacrifice. I sacrifice for you, you sacrifice for me. We all do shit we'd rather not be doing for some imaginary greater good of society. And everyone gets manipulated. And we all become slaves in the process.

But what the fuck is society? Just a group of individuals. How can the needs of the group be served when no individual within it is ever happy? I don't claim to have a real moral code, but if I didn't have the fucked-up damage I have, the thing that slithers around in my brain demanding retribution in whatever form I can find it... I could see a society functioning just fine on enlightened self-interest. I'm not an idiot, I know what I do isn't in my self-interest. It's self-destruction and taking others down with me.

The doc and I are both equally fucked-up psychos. We're just expressed differently. He's the good fucked-up psycho, and I'm the bad one. But we're both dangerous. With him, the consolation you get is... he meant well. Or... how could he have known what would happen? With me? You see me coming. You know what you did. You know why I'm there.

The thing about Good Guy Bad Guys like Lindsay is... they think they're nice guys. They're that dickhead who thinks some woman owes him her pussy because he's such a *nice guy*. They're the most dishonest motherfuckers in the universe—especially to themselves—and the world would be better off without them.

If the doc was the overt killing type, he'd be the kind of guy who'd kill you then convince himself he was doing it to save the world because he was reducing the carbon footprint of humanity or some such shit. I don't give one flying good goddamn about anybody's carbon anything. If I kill you, it's because I wanted to. I don't need a deeper reason.

So whatever Lindsay does to Mina in my absence, he won't do it because he's owning his evil. He'll lie to himself. He'll concoct some elaborate story about how whatever he's doing is somehow in Mina's interest. Because he's weak.

There's a reason she trusts me. It took me a while to figure it out, but I get it now. It's because I never pretended to be the good guy. I never pretend anything I'm doing is in anyone else's greater good or like it's some sacrifice I'm making. I might enjoy the mindfuck, but you know exactly where the fuck you stand with me within seconds of meeting my gaze. There are no warm and reassuring platitudes before I go in for the kill.

But with Lindsay, there are. It's what makes him a more dangerous animal than me.

If I don't manage to escape, Mina's got a few weeks before that bastard realizes I'm not coming back, but after that... I shake the thought from my head. I *am* coming back. Matsumoto's third rate son isn't going to be the one to remove me from this world.

The *Other Matsumoto* observes me like I'm a bug under a glass. I know that feeling well, but from the other side of the glass. I'm pretty sure Matsumoto is the guy's last name. In the Japanese underworld Matsumoto was known only by the one name and his full and formal identity was hidden behind about a thousand shell corporations. So good luck on finding out his real full name. I appreciate this courtesy the Other Matsumoto has given me to think through all this before he launches into whatever stupid speech he's prepared to make me *sorry* I offed his daddy.

"You should be buying me a drink," I say. "Aren't you the new shiny crime lord everybody can piss their pants over and tell cautionary tales to their children about so they won't misbehave? I made you the new legend in your part of the world, and this is the thanks I get?"

The Other Matsumoto clenches his jaw. “I could give two shits about my father.”

I smell the lie and bravado on him as soon as the words are out of his mouth.

“Then why am I here? If you wanted to meet up and shoot the shit about the joys of crime, you could have made an appointment with my secretary.” I don’t have a secretary, but I’m sure he gets that.

“I want the property you stole from my father.”

The house that burned to the ground? No. He means Mina. He wants Mina. The rage boils inside me, and for a moment I imagine that on pure adrenaline alone I could break my bonds and strangle the fuck out of this motherfucker. I take a few slow, measured breaths. No. I don’t want it to be quick. I want to take my time with this one. I didn’t get that chance with his father. This is the opportunity for a do-over. Even if I could escape, if I’m in a full blown rage, I won’t get to take my time with him.

When I trust myself to speak, I say: “She’s protected and hidden.”

If he could get to Mina, he would have already killed me. He doesn’t know where she is. I repeat this over and over in my mind like a mantra. The reassurance is hollow.

Then a cartoon light bulb goes on over my head.

“You’re my client,” I say, finally realizing this thing I should have realized in the first moments of captivity. Motherfucker.

Matsumoto just smiles, as if to say *took you long enough*. Well, I never claimed to be a rocket scientist. I’m good at torture, death, and the logistics to make those things seamlessly come together. It doesn’t automatically make me a super genius mastermind.

This little piece of shit approached me through back channels on the dark web. I should have known that contract was too high. He sought me out specifically. He knew where I’d be tracking the target while Matsumoto was tracking me. But it also means, he had to lure me out, so he can’t possibly know where Mina is.

“I just needed to get you away from her, so I could lure her out to rescue you. I sent her some mail.”

My heartbeat picks up speed, and it’s all I can do not to have a childhood flashback. There are exactly two things that make me scared: Worry for Mina, and the demons from my childhood. I was too small to kill people back then, and when those memories rise up, I forget that I’m bigger now.

I take another long slow breath. We have a PO box. Matsumoto—the father—would have had that address from doing business with the house. Our true identities and location are hidden behind many layers of privacy, multiple corporations and trusts, God himself couldn’t unsnarl it to find our actual physical location.

But with Mina on the line, that confidence fades a bit.

Gabe checks that box once a week. He always varies the day and time he goes. He varies the way he dresses and moves. He always makes sure no one is watching or following. I should have been in charge of getting the mail. I trust Gabe, but what if he wasn’t as careful as he should be? What if he’s started to drop his guard? What if someone followed him back to the house?

MINA

I wait until I'm back underground in mine and Brian's dungeon room before I pull out the envelope. I slipped it under my sweater and into the waistband of my leggings when I took my tray back to the kitchen. No one will follow me down here. The girls are all terrified of the dungeon, even though the monster who runs it is out of the house at the moment. This small fact doesn't seem to matter to them. It's like they think he still has power from a distance or he'll somehow know if they came down here.

Sometimes I want to shake them and say "He's not a wizard!", but I once feared Brian like they do now, and frankly, I'm probably the only human on the planet safe from him. He's not a fluffy housebroken puppy. His feelings for me didn't redeem him or turn him into a hero on a mission to save the world. He is what he is. And what he is, is dangerous. But not to me.

I shrug and flop down on the bed. Maybe they think he's got the place wired up with cameras. Or maybe it's bad memories or the stories of what happens down here. Or maybe it's being alone with *me* they now fear. Whatever it is, I know once I'm underground, I'm safe from prying eyes.

I take a deep breath and turn on the lamp for extra light. The envelope is a thick, crisp, off-white linen. Like an eggshell. Elegant, expensive-looking. There's no return address. Only my name written in Calligraphy on the outside, and the house's PO Box.

This goes against house rules. No one is supposed to be addressing anyone by name when they send paper mail. Well no one's *real* name, anyway. Everything that comes to the house is supposed to come to: The Locke Company, c/o Mr. Smith, Accounting Department. And that is ALL anyone is supposed to ever write if they must use the postal service.

The Locke Company is one of about fifteen shell companies the guys own to hide everything behind. I'm not sure what pretend legit businesses they have going for tax purposes—though some of the money is traded in obscure cryptocurrencies with multiple layers of security and encryption. I do know Lindsay's psychiatry practice in the city is one of the businesses the guys hide behind.

I stare down at the writing: *Mina Calloway, The Dungeon*. Followed by the PO Box. I'm surprised the post office didn't return it to the sender. A shiver travels down my spine. Who knows I'm here? Also... The Dungeon? In Brian's book, addressing a letter like this to the house is a killing offense.

The postage stamp is a tree bloomed out with cherry blossoms. There's no return address. My unease grows with each new detail, but when I turn the envelope over, I freeze as I find myself spiraling into a flashback. On the reverse side is a gold wax seal with the Japanese character for *Love*.

I only know the Japanese character for love because the girl Matsumoto kept before me had been made to paint the word out close to a thousand times on rice paper as gifts to Matsumoto. She was punished harshly whenever she got even a single line wrong. These were supposed to be expressions of her non-existent love for the monster who tormented her.

I learned what it meant because he made a point of telling me that my name, Mina, actually means Love. He must have thought capturing me was some sort of fate being played out between us.

So there it is. Cherry blossom stamp. Wax seal with the Japanese character for love. I take several long slow breaths. It's what I have to do to stop myself from screaming. I'm afraid if I scream, I won't stop.

I thought Matsumoto was dead. Brian assured me. And Brian doesn't half-ass it with the killing. If Brian says somebody is dead, that fucker is worm food. He doesn't make mistakes like this. But my mind can't seem to conceive of any other explanation.

Finally I slip my fingers under the seal and open the envelope. Even though this letter comes from the worst monster I've ever encountered, I can't bring myself to destroy the beautiful letter by ripping into it. Also, I want to delay the confirmation of my fears, even if only by a few moments.

When I open it, a second smaller envelope falls out onto the bed. I leave that aside for the moment to read the handwritten invitation.

YOU ARE FORMALLY INVITED to an Easter Hunt. You will find each clue inside a Faberge-style egg. You will collect the items, find the eggs and clues, and follow all instructions if you want Brian to live. He took something that belongs to me, and I want it back.

I understand you might be reluctant to give yourself to me in exchange for your lover's freedom, but please be advised, the second envelope contains a tracker. My men now know where you are. Should you not come on your own, you'll be extracted, and everyone in that house will die. It seems so similar to something that happened months ago in Japan, does it not?

Tell no one. Bring no one. His life depends on it.

The first clue can be found at the enclosed address. The egg is blue. Be there on The 3rd of April by noon.

HAPPY HUNTING,

CORDIALLY,

Matsumoto

APRIL 3RD IS TOMORROW. He's not leaving me a lot of time. I wonder how long the letter sat at the post office before Gabe went to collect it?

I read it three times. There's another smaller envelope, with a tiny robin's egg blue card inside with an address printed neatly. I'm familiar with the address. It's a row of high-end boutique shops in the city.

Also inside the envelope is a small black square thing. I'm not sure if this is a tracking device or a bluff. I don't know what tracking devices look like, and isn't there a risk it could have been damaged during mailing? Does it work through layers of envelope? I'm embarrassed I have no idea how this stuff works. But it doesn't matter because I don't need Matsumoto to threaten everyone at the house. I'm coming for this motherfucker.

I can't demand proof of life to ensure this guy even has Brian or that he isn't already dead because I have no address. No phone number. No way to contact Matsumoto. My hand shakes as I fold the card and put it back inside the envelope.

My gut says this is real. And I think Brian probably is alive. I feel like the connection between us is so strong that if he died, I'd somehow know it. Another reason I think he's alive is because Matsumoto is a sick piece of work. Since Brian rescued me from him—which he'd consider an insult—he'd want Brian alive to see him take me back. He'd get off on that kind of showmanship.

I know what Brian would want me to do. He'd want me to leave him to die. I know it's the smart thing, the thing that could protect me. After all, maybe Brian can get away on his own. He hasn't stayed alive as long as he has by accident.

If Matsumoto sent a letter to the PO box, and had to capture Brian out in the city somewhere, he probably doesn't know the location of the pleasure house. At least not before the tracking device, which may or may not be a bluff.

And he could never make Brian talk. I'm convinced Brian could withstand any amount of torture and keep his mouth shut. He doesn't value human life, except mine. I think sometimes he cares more about my survival and safety than his own. I know he'd go to any lengths to keep me, to protect me. So I know up front that if I take this bait—and it is bait—and Brian and I both happen to make it out alive, I will be punished.

But I don't care. I can't just leave him. Whether it's wise or not and whether he can ever truly return it or not, I love him. Besides, ever since this thing inside me switched on... this slithering dark thing that turned me from prey to predator, I've felt the urge to let this new beast out of its cage, but I've been given no real opportunity to unleash it.

People respond to the things that happen to them in different ways. Maybe everyone has a limit. I thought I'd reached mine years ago, but something changed in me after Brian brought me back, and now I no longer want to hide away from the world. I no longer want to be small and avoid the attention of those who might harm me. I want to be the thing that stalks the night. I want to be the thing the monsters are afraid of. Like Brian.

If you'd told me when I first arrived at the house that I'd want to become more like the man who ended up buying me—the most terrifying thing in this house—I would have said you needed to up your dosage.

But now... it's different. If Matsumoto really survived, I want to be the one to kill him. I appreciate all Brian has done for me. He hunted down every last man who abused me and removed them from the world when I couldn't do such a thing for myself.

But what about my revenge? When do I get to cause death and mayhem and destruction? When do I get to be the powerful one? I feel like a newly born vampire who hasn't yet had her first taste of blood.

I know that first taste will be the thing that determines who I am from that point onward. For now, people at the house are a little afraid of me, a little wary. But I haven't actually *done* anything yet to warrant such scurrying fear.

I want to change that.

Matsumoto wants me to come alone because I'll be vulnerable. But I want to come alone so no one interrupts my vengeance or tries to save me—from him or from myself. I no longer fear him. I don't know if that's healthy. Or stupid. I don't know if a whole giant chunk of my emotions have just shut down. But if so, I'm glad. I can't have distractions like fear or weakness for what I'm prepared to do.

I've been given a beautiful opportunity to right a very big wrong and to save Brian's ass for once. And if I tell Lindsay or any of the other owners of the house, they'll either let Brian die, or fuck it up somehow. If that happened, I would never forgive them. And I might do something... terrible. Something I actually *couldn't* live with. I only want to harm the guilty. That is the one line I don't want to cross.

The problem is... I'm an indoor kitty.

I glance down at the metal security bracelet locked around my wrist. Officially I can walk out any door to this house and be outside in the free open air. But there's a perimeter, and if I cross it, all I'll get is pain until I'm back inside my electric fence like a good girl.

So I have to get this fucking bracelet off. And I need weapons, and a car. I check the postmark on the envelope. It's two weeks old. That more or less answers the mystery of how long it may have been sitting at the post office. What happens if I miss the deadline? Will the egg be gone? I wonder how long Matsumoto would wait before he decides I'm not coming and just kills Brian.

He probably assumes he mailed the letter well in advance of his needs. He probably assumes I've been sitting on it for a while. I look at the postmark again. Two weeks ago Brian hadn't left the house yet. Matsumoto mailed this before he took Brian, so how do I know he even has him?

I sigh. Because he should have been back a week ago. He told me when he'd be back. That date has come and gone, so even though Matsumoto mailed the letter before Brian left the house, he obviously does have him. He was just that confident his plan was air-tight. Which means, if I do this, I'm walking into a trap.

He couldn't have mailed it too long before he acted, or it might have reached the house before Brian was even gone. So I can estimate about how long he's had him.

I unfold myself from my spot on the bed and go to Brian's big weapons stash. It's a giant... well I'm not sure if you could call a secondary room inside basically a dungeon a "walk-in closet" but let's just roll with that description.

When I first became Brian's this room was just a mysterious locked door, but I should have known there were weapons inside. In the time since I've been back, I've seen him go in this room many times. And when he goes out on jobs and leaves me behind, he leaves the ring of keys in one of the dresser drawers. I'm not sure if he knows I've seen him put them there or not, but I open the drawer now and take out the big key ring.

I try each key in turn, unsurprised when it's the last key that unlocks the door. You'd expect with Brian that this door wouldn't be so low tech. Maybe a keypad with a pass code and a thumbprint and retinal scan. With as paranoid as he is, it would make sense, but, maybe just a locked door calls less attention.

If someone made it down this far into the house and was confronted with a high tech security system guarding the door, they may become even more curious about what's on the other side.

When I get the door open and switch on the fluorescent buzzing lights, I'm confronted with what can only be described as an arsenal.

He's got about seventeen AR-15 semi-automatic rifles in that classic sexy black. Multiple calibers. I pick up a .223 from the rack and hold it, feeling its weight, which isn't as much as you'd

expect.

Brian likes to talk a lot about weapons and torture equipment, so I've got way more knowledge on this subject than I would ordinarily have. I sit with him a lot outside when he cleans his guns after a job or after target practice.

The light weight of an AR is perfect for a woman. It doesn't feel like you're carrying too much. You can move with it. Though I doubt, Matsumoto is going to put himself at such a disadvantage that I'm going to be able to just walk in waving this kind of artillery around. Which is a shame, because I'm pretty sure I'd look like a badass doing it.

So that means... concealed. Something in a more discreet package. I open a long sleek steel drawer to find every kind of compact handgun you could imagine, as well as throwing knives, throwing stars, garden variety hunting knives.

Brian keeps all the torture stabby things in the dungeon cells so there's none of that here, only what most would officially call *weapons*. In another drawer, he has actual fucking grenades. I can't imagine the scenarios he finds himself in which require grenades. I decide not to think about that.

This whole room is a Call of Duty player's dream stash.

I grab a large black duffle bag from the corner and start filling it with concealable weapons. Once that's done, I scan the room for... I know there are other important things Brian keeps locked in here. Non-weapon things... like car keys... and probably the code for the bracelet on my wrist, unless he's got it memorized. But even if memorized I'm sure he'd have a backup written down somewhere.

He's the guy who keeps all his computer passwords written down in a notebook. The code to the bracelet is probably in that book. When I first learned he kept all his sensitive passwords in a notebook, I thought he was crazy, but his reasoning is actually sound.

If you keep your passwords in your mind, you can't have as many different passwords as you need. And they can't be as complicated as you need. If you keep them on some sort of password saver somewhere electronically, what if it gets hacked?

On paper, someone would have to physically break into your space. And anyone who attempts such a mission with Brian will end up riddled with bullet holes, so they can't slip away with the intel. This reasoning seemed solid to me.

I run my fingers along the walls, pressing the slightly uneven stones because I'm sure I glimpsed Brian doing this once. Finally, right before I feel like a complete nut, a space in the wall opens and... Bob, tell our contestant the prize behind door number one!

Keys for about seven different cars from the most luxurious to the most non-descript and utilitarian. I pick a "blend with the world" sedan and drop the keys into the bag, disappointed that I didn't find the passwords with it. But Brian wouldn't keep all his treasure in one place. So I keep going, trailing my hands along the stones, pressing gently over each one.

After about fifteen minutes of this, I finally reach a slightly oblong stone in the back corner of the room to the right of all the AR's. It's all the way at the bottom, closest to the floor. When I press it, other stones come forward to reveal a tray. And on that tray, is a slim black notebook.

I pull it out, thrilled to find it's full of all of Brian's passwords. I thumb through the book, hoping to find the bracelet code. I'm surprised to find it under "Mina". I mean come on, Brian? Not even a code name? He is just *that* confident that nobody is getting into this room?

I input the code on the bracelet, switch to "disarm", and the silver metal cuff unlocks and falls from my wrist to clank loudly on the concrete floor.

Great, now I just have the whole day to wait. There's no way I can risk leaving the house before dark. Too many people could see me and too many would try to stop me. And I'm not yet prepared to

shoot them for their misguided life goals.

I go to where I know Brian keeps a stash of cash. I take three rolls, which comes out to a total of \$30,000 in hundred dollar bills. It may be excessive, but I don't know what's out there. I doubt I could ever bribe a man as rich as Matsumoto, and I plan to kill him anyway, but I just feel better with a lot of money. I don't know how long his game is. I don't know what supplies I might need. And there might be some low level lackey I *can* bribe with this kind of money.

MINA

Escaping the house is the most anti-climactic thing I've ever done. I probably could have escaped a long time ago. The thing was, I didn't want to. Once Brian brought me back from Japan, all I wanted was to be with him. I didn't care about the rest of the world or what was beyond the walls of the Pleasure House. I only cared that he was with me.

Once everyone's asleep, I change into all black, grab the keys, money, and bag of weapons, and slip out of the house. The wall alarm is armed, but... I know that code too.

When I reach the garage with all the extra cars in it, I push the button on the key fob. The nondescript muted gold sedan's headlights flash a couple of times along with a little beep. Brian once told me this car blends better than black. With black, he says you always look like you're with the government, and it makes people uncomfortable and more on guard—kind of like when you're driving down the road and a random police car is behind you.

I happen to know Brian also has this car in black, so I can only assume that sometimes he wants people to think he's with the government. It's an odd intimidation tactic, but Brian isn't just about the torture and blind rage. He's a strategist. The people at the house only see Brian for the destruction he causes. They don't appreciate all the planning before the demolition.

I stop for the night at a small motel and sleep.

I don't dream.

When I wake, it's like I closed my eyes for a split second, open them, and it's morning. I hate those nights. I'd almost prefer disturbing dreams, then at least I feel like I actually slept instead of simply watching an abrupt scene change in a movie.

Half an hour later I've showered, dressed, had a quick drive-thru breakfast—while navigating traffic—and made it to the row of boutique stores at the address I was given.

I'm browsing the first of the boutique stores, looking for the blue egg and realizing I made a huge rookie mistake. Maybe all-black would be appropriate for the actual confrontation with Matsumoto, but wandering around everywhere in it... just looks a little... off.

I was at least smart enough to separate a few of the hundreds from one of the rolls of cash. The only thing that would look worse than skulking around a high-end boutique dressed like an assassin while appearing to be casing the place, would be to also pull out a giant roll of bills. I'm not the most subtle of Queen Pins, here.

Given my wardrobe situation and the realization that I don't know how many stupid clues this motherfucker has or how much he plans to drag out this torment. It might be wise to have other clothes.

I don't know why I didn't think of this back at the house, but I was too focused on getting out, saving Brian, and killing Matsumoto. And I'm not sure what it says about me that my thoughts have turned more to killing Matsumoto than the former. I love Brian, but there's a big part of me that believes he can take care of himself. Or maybe I just don't want to believe he's truly human and breakable like me. I want to believe nothing else can ever harm him, and nothing is strong enough to take him down.

He's gotten this far without me. Surely this isn't the only sticky situation he's been in. So right now my biggest fear isn't that Brian will die, but that he'll free himself and kill Matsumoto before I can do it.

This sounds insane even in my own brain. It wasn't that long ago that I was the damsel in distress. I was the captive. I was the one at the mercy of someone else hoping for a rescue I somehow knew wasn't coming, and then it did. I haven't been the same since that moment.

When we got back to the house and I was settled, Brian went to punish the girl who caused me to be taken. And I didn't care. I didn't care about her screams. I didn't care about her pain. I didn't care because something in my emotions switched off, and something else switched on. It's like my body, mind, and soul, shifted to a backup generator. The pain and fear got muted and the anger got turned up to eleven. But with the muting of the pain and fear came muting of other emotions—including good ones.

The things that could touch me before, suddenly couldn't. The things I used to feel, I no longer did. I'm still wading through this fog of anger and desire for vengeance, but the other feelings, they don't work quite right. I think I know what Brian meant when he said he wasn't sure if he could feel a real normal feeling or if he could love. I'm not sure what this means for me, for him, for us. I'm afraid if I lose the better parts of me, it will spell doom for both of us.

Even so, a part of me is grateful for this muted place inside me, this simmering rage, this thing that means I'm not scared to follow this trail of breadcrumbs to the man who wants to recapture me and hurt me. Because I plan to hurt him. He thinks he has the upper hand because I'm scared. But I'm not scared. I don't know if that's stupid or dangerous but I'm not scared of him.

The only thing I fear is that I could lose Brian. As long as that doesn't happen, I'll be okay. I don't know if I'll ever fix whatever broke inside me. But somehow, I'll be okay. Eventually.

I shake myself out of the memories and grab some casual clothes in my size... some jeans and T-shirts and a lightweight sweater because it's pretty breezy out. When the first things I try on fit, I leave them on, and go out to the front with the rest.

If there's an egg in this store, some random child has likely already wandered off with it. I try not to let that thought drag me down as I put the pile of clothes on the counter. I rip the tags off what I'm wearing and hand them to the sales girl. She gives me that look that Julia Roberts got in *Pretty Woman* the first time she tried to shop, but she rings it all up and puts it in a bag anyway.

"\$488.62," she says, snidely like she thinks I can't afford it and will have to put things back since I didn't bother to look at price tags. I'm on an Easter hunt, not a bargain hunt. I mean yeah it's not cheap, but it's not Dior, either. This lady needs to get over herself.

I pull out five hundred dollar bills from the black pants I carried to the counter. Now she looks at me like she suspects I'm a drug dealer, but she takes my tainted money and bags everything up for me without comment.

She doesn't even tell me to have a nice day.

I search the next three shops on this row. No blue egg. Next I come to a bakery. I could use a donut and coffee. I really am starting to worry something has happened to this egg I'm supposed to be

looking for. Or maybe Matsumoto has sent me on a wild goose chase so he can get the jump on me like the last time I wandered free from my gilded cage.

This thought gives me pause. I drop off the bag of clothes at Brian's car, slip a clip-on holster onto the inside of my jeans, and conceal a .380 handgun. I'm not sure if this caliber would drop a full grown man or his thugs, but it's what I can easily conceal and it doesn't have too much kick. A .22 barely kicks at all when it fires, but at too much distance it carries too much ricochet risk. I've paid attention as Brian has given me these little nuggets of weaponry wisdom.

This time when I walk back into the bakery, I have significantly more situational awareness and far less obsession about a stupid egg that may not even exist.

I can't believe I'm such a little idiot. That must be what Matsumoto is doing. He just wants to send me all over the place so he can take me unaware. If Brian knew I was being this stupid, he'd probably kill me himself.

"Can I help you?" a much nicer girl than the one at the boutique says when I reach the counter. I find I need that coffee and donut even more than before I made this startling realization. I scan the display case, trying to make up my mind, when a reflection catches my eye and I look up to see a small blue cake shaped and decorated like a Faberge egg.

I'm sure my eyes are comically wide, and the girl probably thinks it's just sugar-lust taking over.

Matsumoto said Faberge-style egg, so I naturally expected something made out of metal or ceramic... a decorative piece. Not food. And maybe it's a coincidence. I mean it is almost Easter, after all. A fancy decorated egg cake in a bakery right before Easter isn't exactly an unlikely event.

"Is that egg cake for sale?" I ask.

"It's \$19.99."

I'm so glad I brought a bunch of money with me. Between filling up the gas tank, breakfast, the clothes, and this... I'm already punching close to \$600. And I still have plenty if the opportunity for bribery comes up.

"Great, can I get that and a coffee to go, please?"

The girl boxes up the egg inside a small white cake box, fixes me a coffee in a to-go cup, and gives me a wrapped up fork and knife like she thinks I plan to just dig in now. I pay, thank her, and carry the package back out to the car.

I take a quick, furtive glance around the parking lot... looking for obvious government-looking black cars. The last time Matsumoto took me, that's the kind of thing they were driving. Brian's totally right about this. If kidnappers really want to blend, they should drive rusted-out Honda Civics. Nobody ever suspects the rusted-out Honda Civic. But it's like they want you to know they're bringing your doom with them. So non-descript black sedans are the favored stalker car. At least for the active, powerful criminal element, like Matsumoto.

Even if he doesn't plan to pull me off the street in broad daylight, he could have someone watching me and my progress. But, I don't see anything suspicious, so I settle into the driver's side of Brian's car and lock the door.

I take a sip of the coffee, as though caffeine could settle my jangled nerves, and carefully open the white box. I have a moment of self-doubt as I wonder if I'm about to feel really stupid, smashing and destroying a cake for a non-existent secret message. I decide against smashing into it with my hand like a lunatic and instead use the knife to cut down the center.

About half an inch in, I meet resistance and use the fork to dig into the cake like I'm digging up a dinosaur, brushing the moist part of the cake away as though it's so much dirt.

I'm surprised when I find there actually is something baked inside—a long aluminum foil

wrapped tube. It's almost the entire length of the cake. I pull it out and remove the foil wrapping to find a glass tube, like a test tube. There's a long scroll of paper containing a message far longer than I would have believed could have so compactly fit inside this cake.

I'm tempted to eat the cake. It was so beautiful, and it smells divine, but I've had breakfast. I won't starve, and the idea has suddenly popped into my head that the cake could be drugged.

I don't think Matsumoto would murder me with poison. That's a woman's method of choice. He wants me alive and punished for daring to be freed from him. But there could be a sedative in the cake which only makes me easier prey. And I'm still worried the entire Easter Hunt may be a distraction from something else.

Since I don't trust my self-control on this, even in the face of possible sedative, I take the cake back across the street and dump it in an outdoor trash can, really hoping that move was smart and not paranoid.

To console myself for my loss, I go back inside the bakery, order a little bunny cupcake with pink buttercream frosting and chocolate cake.

"Back for more already?" the girl says.

I wonder if she knows what was hidden inside the cake. I doubt she was the one who baked it in, and even if the egg cake was drugged, the rest of the bakery's offerings should be safe.

"It's for a special event but it just smelled so good, I wanted something for myself now."

"I've been there," she says. She puts the cupcake into a small white cupcake box, I pay her, and go back to the car.

I fortify myself with sugar and caffeine before carefully removing the rolled up paper from the glass tube.

MINA, it is good of you to join my Easter Hunt. The prize for successful completion is Brian's life. But unfortunately, the price is your freedom. You must care a great deal for him to make such a sacrifice.

THE REST of Matsumoto's long winded note just gives me directions to a lingerie shop, what to say to the person and that there will be a package for me there.

It's not that I wanted to go on a scavenger hunt for this psycho, but it seems clear to me that he really doesn't know how they work. There are supposed to be clever clues, not boring directions to each location. I feel like an executive assistant running errands.

Though I shouldn't complain about this. After all, the last thing I need is a set of complicated clues I might not figure out while the clock ticks on Brian's life. There could be any number of cultural differences that could make riddles not translate from his brain to mine, and it's the last thing I need.

At the lingerie store, I give the stated code phrase, "Someone is holding a package for bunny."

No, I'm not kidding. That's the lame code phrase. If I didn't already want revenge, if this man hadn't already destroyed me, I'd be tempted to kill him just for sending me all over the city collecting these stupid eggs.

The girl behind the counter smiles and bends down to collect a shopping bag from the ground. It's white-and-black striped with the stores' logo across the front and black tissue paper popping out.

I thank her and take it back to the car. Inside the bag I find a black leather corset with pale blue ribbons criss-crossing at the back. And a pink Faberge-style egg. This one looks to be painted ceramic and has a hinge that can be opened.

Inside is another short note, leading me to the next location. This asshole sends me to a separate department store or lingerie store, making me ask for a package for bunny. Each package has a piece of an outfit and another egg.

They are all high end stores, and I can't help but be disgusted by how Matsumoto flaunts his wealth while gloating about what he thinks will be his triumphant recapture of me. I've given up on the idea that he has henchmen waiting around to take me.

Over the course of the day I collect a garter belt and a light green egg, stockings with seams and a pale yellow egg, black lace panties with a purple egg, and finally black high-heels with an orange egg. Aside from the luxury lingerie and that first bakery egg—which set my expectations for this fiasco way too high—this has been the most boring Easter egg hunt of my life.

Inside the final egg with the shoes, I'm instructed to meet him at his temporary home, in the basement, wearing only the contents I picked up on the hunt. I make a pit stop at a craft and fabric store for some supplies.

I park in an empty parking lot on my way outside of the city proper to make some alterations and change clothes. It occurs to me that maybe he didn't give me real clues or a real hunt beyond that first egg because he thinks I'm super afraid. Maybe he didn't think I'd come on the hunt at all and he'd have to *extract* me.

I think he must get some satisfaction out of the possibility that I might wring my hands and cry and pace and have a panic attack or three before finally deciding to spare the house and offering myself as tribute.

He obviously doesn't believe I have the constitution to handle all the lady-brain taxing riddles and clues he could have given me. Or maybe this is just the extent of his cleverness. Either way, I don't think Matsumoto is prepared to deal with the new and improved me. But I'm excited to introduce myself.

BRIAN

I've been here maybe a week now. I can't remember. I lose track of the days. Most of the time I've been free inside the cell. Matsumoto releases a gas from tubes in the ceiling that knocks me out long enough that he can chain or unchain me as he wills. I guess he knows I'm in here for a while and he doesn't want me stinking up the place. This guy is all about personal hygiene.

There's a shower, sink, and toilet over to one side so I can stay reasonably clean. And I get two meals a day. It's not the Ritz, but I'm not complaining. Unlike me, Matsumoto Junior doesn't seem to have a taste for torture. At least not of men. Unless he just wants to keep a clean canvas for the main event.

He does seem to like psychological torture though, because when I'm chained, he enjoys telling me in minute detail the evil horrifying shit he plans to do to Mina when she arrives. And he leaves the cell door open to taunt me with the freedom I can't have.

Right now is one of those moments. I'm chained, Matsumoto stands here like the smug motherfucker he is. I've had my daily shower and first meal. My captor looks more on edge than normal, as though he's anticipating something. I can guess what he's anticipating.

"She won't come," I say. "In the first place, she can't get out of the house. How would she get keys to a car? She has a security bracelet that won't allow her off the property... and even if she could get out, she wouldn't, she's smart. She knows you'd never let me go. You let me go and you're a dead man, do you hear me, motherfucker?"

Matsumoto just smiles. But he isn't looking at me. "And yet... here she is."

No. No. No. No. No!

I can't bring myself to look at the door because I know what I'll find. All I can do is scream *No* over and over in my mind. I can't even get my vocal cords to work right now.

Finally I manage to choke out the words. "Mina, why? Why would you come for me?"

"You know why."

She's wearing a Black corset that pushes her tits up high. The corset has pale blue ribbons. Black lace panties. Garter belt, stockings, high heels. If she were to turn around, I know there would be those perfect seams down the back of her perfect legs.

"Turn, and let me see you," Matsumoto says as if wishing to confirm this thought for himself. He rotates his finger in the air. He is so fucking smug, and I want to rip his throat out with my teeth. I want to drink his blood down like a vampire or wild animal. I want to hold his beating heart in my hand, and watch it stop. I want *him* to watch it stop.

Every violent fantasy I've ever held, crystallizes in this one moment and flashes through my mind

like the highlight reel of one's life at the moment of death.

I see the shock in her face. She thought what I thought, that she'd be dealing with the man who held her captive and tortured her. And yet still, she came.

"Not what you were expecting, Mina?" he says, so proud of himself for pulling off this lie.

She turns slowly in a circle, giving Matsumoto The Sequel a good look at her. But she doesn't look afraid. She looks... angry.

"Is this what you want, you piece of shit? Me, for Brian?"

He laughs. "Well, you are quite beautiful. My father always had excellent taste when it came to that, but you are also quite stupid if you think I would ever be foolish enough to release a rabid animal who'd rip me apart the second he got free. Do you really imagine he'd ever leave you here with me? He'd never accept such a trade. The poor fool loves you."

I don't even bother to contradict this, I just look at her, like the greedy asshole I am because whatever is about to happen next, I can't let my mind go there. I struggle again in the shackles, but it doesn't matter.

I don't love Mina in some romance hero way. I'm not sure what we share could ever be deemed love to a normal person. We are both too broken to ever be able to have that bright shiny clean beautiful thing sonnets are written about. But she is the air I breathe.

"So," our piece of shit captor says conversationally, "I'm trying to decide what will be the most satisfying. Mina, maybe you can help me decide. Should I fuck you in front of your lover, and let him see my triumph, or should I just go ahead and kill him in front of you, and then take my prize? I think fucking me while covered in the blood of your old master should drive home who you now truly belong to. We don't take kindly to theft in my family."

"Kill me and let her go," I say. "You don't want your father's sloppy seconds. She's a terrible lay. I keep her around because she's just such a sad little pathetic puppy, so eager to do my will."

When I look at Mina, she's not looking at me, she's looking at Matsumoto with pure vengeance in her gaze. Why didn't she bring weapons? Why? How could she do this? I expected to see hurt from my words, but she knows what I'm doing. This is all just to hurt me, to punish me. If I can get him to kill me, maybe he'll let Mina go. After all, he doesn't truly want her. He can have any woman he wants. Mina will lose her appeal to him the second the light goes out of my eyes.

I want to believe this. I want to believe it so much I'm willing to lie to myself, something I very rarely do. But deep down I know he won't let her go. I know if he kills me, her last chance in this world is gone. Sacrificing myself for her is not some noble act. It's the coward's way because I can't stand to watch her be hurt. I can't live knowing I've failed her in such a complete way, that my entire life has led up to this one crucial moment of failure.

Nothing that has happened up to this point matters now, because I have ruined her. It would have been better if I'd never come into her life.

He draws a gun, and Mina freezes for a moment, her breath stopping for a split second before she remembers how to keep herself alive once again.

"Or... here's an idea..." Matsumoto says... "I could shoot your lover so that he won't die immediately and then fuck you while he bleeds out. It's the best of both worlds. What do you think, My Love?"

I'm surprised she hasn't turn and run. But we both know there's a guard outside this door. Junior here may not have the full-service level of protection he'd otherwise have, but still, one strong man is enough given my state and Mina's helplessness. Once she came in, she sealed her fate. I pull again at the shackles as though I could break solid metal. I can't let this happen.

I want to scream at her. I want to kill her. I want to punish her. How could she betray us like this? Coming here. She has to know I can't be saved. We can't be saved. She should have let me die here and stayed safe at the house. She has to know it's what I would want. And yet she defied me by coming here.

I bought this woman. I *own* this woman. She is meant to obey me, and she knows she's done the opposite. My word is motherfucking law, and she knows this. I want to string her up in my dungeon and show her what real punishment is, but I know I'll never get out of here for that.

All I can manage is a few low words. "Why didn't you leave me, Mina?"

She doesn't even look at me. Her eyes are trained on Matsumoto and the gun he has trained on me. I expect fear in her gaze. I expect her to start begging or pleading, to revert back to the terrified woman I first met. I know she's been different since Japan, but surely not *this* different.

There's no fear or begging, just a simmering white hot heat emanating off her. A murderous rage. I know that look. I've had that look.

And yet. She has no weapons. She has no way to act out this rage. She isn't physically strong enough. She has no training in any martial art. As far as I know she's never even trained with the weapons she clearly doesn't have.

I know she didn't just decide to dress this way. Matsumoto ordered her to dress this way, no doubt so he could clearly see she had no guns on her.

What happens next, happens in slow motion. The slowness of what I see makes me fear for her. Matsumoto is watching me, gun on me, the slide is racked, he's ready to fire, and I can only assume he's going with his *shoot me, then fuck her while I bleed out*, plan. It enrages me, but I'm more helpless than she is right now and that's not saying much.

Except, that she isn't helpless. I watch her hand go behind her to the back of the corset to pull out a knife.

Time speeds up from this moment, as though someone is fast forwarding through a movie to get to the good part. I catch the glint of metal as she hurls it through the air at Matsumoto, his attention still on me, the gun fires, but goes wide. Then comes the ricochet.

The stupid motherfucker is using a .22. It's a great gun for close range assassination. But this isn't a classic close-range assassination.

"Cover, Mina!" It's the only words I can think to say as I hunch in on myself, as though I could stop the bullet if it decides to bounce off the walls and into me. But she's too furious to think about that.

The knife hits Matsumoto in the shoulder, surprising him, and causing him to drop the gun. At the same time, the bouncing bullet decides to land in his chest, stopped by his bullet-proof vest. He howls in both pain and surprise from the unexpected knife before rounding on Mina.

"You Bitch, I'll enjoy making you pay for that. Maybe I'll just put you in the other chains and..."

But before he can finish his threat, Mina rips the sides of the corset apart, and I realize she's altered the garment to hide my throwing stars. She storms toward him, throwing the metal stars, no doubt knowing that without training, she's got to be close range to hit her mark. One embeds deep into his thigh, another into his upper arm. He curses, but before he can lunge for her, she's got his gun.

All of a sudden his rage turns to fear. It's always like this with the biggest bullies. They're so tough while they have the upper hand, but the second they don't anymore, they're ready to plead and beg. I'm not sure if he's yet ready for that with Mina, but he's in pain from the stars and the knife. He's losing blood. He's almost there. Almost to the sweet point of coming apart and begging.

She holds the gun way more steady than I would expect, and it's in this moment I'm grateful she

went dark and hard like me. I'm grateful her emotions got muted like mine. Because it's the only thing protecting her. Otherwise, the adrenaline would be fucking her up right now. Her hand would be shaking too hard to aim the gun. She never would have gotten those stars in the target.

"You're not going to use that," Matsumoto says, now entering the bargaining stage.

"I'm giving you one chance to live," she says, her voice steady and dead calm. That's my girl. "Chain yourself to the wall, tell me where the key to the shackles is, and Brian and I will just leave. You leave the country, and we'll let you live."

That is absolutely not happening. She can't make promises for me. But she shoots me a hard glare, and I don't dare open my mouth to say it. I don't think she's being truthful with him anyway, but he doesn't know that. It's not as though she's under any obligation to be honorable with the man who wishes to murder me and take her captive.

Matsumoto—obviously believing that despite her star and knife throwing of moments before, she doesn't have the heart to kill someone—starts to move in the direction of the shackles.

Then it's like some revelation hits him, something he forgot.

"Atsushi!" he shouts.

"Don't bother," she says. "I already killed your guard. If you don't want to be next, I suggest you chain yourself to the wall."

Matsumoto laughs a hysterical, maniacal laugh, like a man who has truly lost his mind. At no moment is an animal more dangerous than this. His reflexes are slowed from the blood he's losing, but he tries to lunge for her anyway.

Without blinking, Mina puts a bullet in his knee. "NOW, motherfucker!"

He screams. "Okay, okay.... I... okay..." as he hobbles over to the wall, locking himself into the chains.

As soon as he's chained, Mina looks like she's about to leave us both, but instead, she opens the door, aims the gun, and fires down at something on the ground.

I raise an eyebrow when she returns. I can finally breathe properly again. She's got this well in hand, and now I can just enjoy the glorious show. She has never been more attractive to me than she is now. As much as I've relished being her protector, doing one good thing for one person, it's nothing compared to watching her rise like a phoenix from the ashes.

"I had to kill the guard," she says to me. "I seduced him and put a needle in his throat, but I think you mentioned that drug only lasts about an hour."

Who *is* this woman? I'm sure I'm gaping at her like a goldfish.

"You have no control over Brian. He'll kill me. You can't keep your promise," Matsumoto says as his reality seems to fully be clicking in.

"You're too pathetic to kill," I say. But he's right. As soon as Mina lets me out, I'm killing this piece of shit.

Mina crosses the room again, her heels clicking sharply over the concrete in the sexiest sound I've ever heard. She gets in his face and presses in on the star embedded in his thigh. "Where. Is. The. Key?" she hisses at him.

She is glorious.

"I-in my pocket." He can barely get the words out.

She slips her hand down his pants pocket, and I swear he closes his eyes in bliss for a moment, and now I really want to kill him. What I truly want to do is torture the shit out of him until he begs for death, but I don't think he'll last long enough for that. He's half an hour from expiration at most.

I expect her to unlock me from my chains so I can finish him. I expect at any moment that whatever

fuels her will run out. Even though I've seen the evidence of what she's become with me, I still can't fully believe it. I still expect it to all fall apart, for her to fall apart.

But she doesn't unlock my shackles. Instead, she drops the keys in the middle of the floor. She speaks to Matsumoto, but her gaze is locked on mine as she unfastens the corset, one hook at a time down her back.

"What was it you said you wanted to do? Shoot Brian, and fuck me while he bleeds out so he could see your triumph? You'll have to excuse me if I can't remember the exact words. I'm buzzing with so much adrenaline right now."

She smirks at me as I'm sure my eyes widen. What the fuck is she doing?

"Mina?" I say. She can't possibly be doing what I think she's about to be doing. But she just tosses the corset to the ground, her tits popping free. I only now notice the blood from Matsumoto on her. She looks like a goddess of war, fresh off the battlefield, her hair and eyes wild with both fury and a mix of battle lust and sexual lust.

I can't tear my gaze from her as she unhooks the garter belt and slides the panties down. The stockings are made so that they can stay up on their own. The garter belt is just because it's sexy. She keeps the stockings and shoes on.

She does one slow turn. I'm not sure if it's for me or Matsumoto. Probably both of us, then she strides over to me, purpose in her gaze. I'm hard as granite, and I've long given up caring what such things mean about me.

I know she's not going to fuck me. Mina doesn't fuck. And I can live with that. I don't trust myself fucking her anyway. I don't trust that the darker sides of me won't come out to hurt her.

She won't fuck me, but maybe she's going to... blow me? I try to sort through the insane thought process going through my mind. I can't let her do that... not in front of this monster who planned to... not after his father...

But I'm wrong, she isn't going to blow me. Before I can utter a word, she's unzipped my pants. She straddles me and lowers herself onto my cock, letting out a delicious hiss of pleasure as I fill her pussy. A matching groan escapes my throat as I *feel* her. For the first time in all the time we've been together... I am inside her and I feel her exquisite warm wetness.

I was lying to myself when I said I didn't want this. I can't remember being inside a woman ever... feeling like this.

There is a sharp intake of breath, and I realize it's mine. She grips my chin and turns me so that my eyes lock with hers, so I can't escape this intimacy with her. I wouldn't want to. I'm just afraid she'll see how empty I am inside, that the words I've said to her weren't hollow platitudes about what a monster I am.

She rides my cock like she was born to do it. I want to ask her if she's okay. I want to ask her so many things. I'm not normally a guy who likes conversation unless I'm torturing someone in the dungeon, but I want to talk to her right now.

But I can't. I can't let Matsumoto hear these things he has no right to hear even as he's bleeding out and looks about to lose consciousness.

Despite recent events, I'm so close to that razor edge of pleasure. Her fingers dig into my shoulders as she takes me with no question who's in control right now, grinding her pussy down harder on me.

Her delicious moans fill the air as she fucks me harder, riding out an orgasm I thought she couldn't have this way. Her pleasure sends me over the edge into my own, and I shudder, spilling myself inside her. She kisses me hard, then leans against my shoulder, panting as I slowly go soft within her.

She seems to gather herself after a moment and rises off me. Our combined spendings drip down her thigh, soaking into the silk stockings. I think she's about to finally unchain me, but she isn't done yet.

She turns and walks back across the room. Matsumoto is barely conscious at this point, and she slaps him hard across the face to bring him back to her.

I watch as she rips the knife out of his shoulder and he screams again like the little fucking girl he ultimately has turned out to be.

I can't see the expression on her face from this angle, or the look in her eyes, but I hear her voice.

"When you get to hell, tell your father I said hello."

Then she drags the blade across his throat and ends him. She turns back to me, covered in his blood, and smiles.

This dark thing that I have created... she is stunning.

MINA

As soon as I uncuff Brian he flies into action. The first thing he does is gather me into his arms like a starving man in the desert. Like I'm the last puddle of water for miles and miles. He holds me and whispers in my ear: "When we get home, after you've rested, you're getting a punishment."

Not exactly the whispered endearments one expects after a harrowing near-death experience, but this is Brian we're talking about.

I nod. I always knew that was the price, and I imagine it will be an actual punishment, unlike how he normally is with me. But I know he won't harm me. He's got to get this out. I saw how terrified he was when he saw me walk into the room. I know he still sees me—or saw me—as the helpless broken doll he rescued... twice.

I'm not sure what he sees now. I don't know if we only work as long as I'm helpless. Will the fact that I came here like this and saved the day, change things? Will it make him not want me anymore? I've always known that part of what Brian sees in me, and the reason I'm safe from him, is because we're alike.

We wear mirroring scars on our back from two separate and unrelated horrific pasts. His from his childhood, mine much more recent. But if I become more like him in his darkness, does that change his desire to protect me? Does it change how safe or unsafe I am with him? I don't know. But I had to do it.

It was my turn to do the rescuing. He pulls back from me and looks away, taking a long deep breath, as though he's gathering himself. Finally, he orders me to sit, then leaves me alone in the room. When he returns, he's clearly raided the kitchen. He drops a box of round crackers, a sealed package of cheese, a sealed package of deli meat, and a bottled water—unsurprisingly also sealed—at my feet.

I know, as paranoid as Brian is that he has to have all food sealed in factory condition if he's at another location besides the house. Not sure why Matsumoto would poison his own food, but... you just never know what's going on in someone else's space or who has it out for whom. Bad men have enemies, and you wouldn't want to consume the poison meant for another. Better to be safe.

"Eat. It will ground you and help keep you from going into shock."

I don't think I'm going into shock, though I'm buzzy as hell with adrenaline, and my hands are a little shaky, so I don't argue with him. I rip into the food and make little cracker sandwiches with the turkey and cheddar. It may just be snack food but with the energy he delivered it, it may as well have been a wild boar he hunted and wrestled to the ground for me.

“Where’s my mayo?” I ask.

He smirks. “That smart mouth is going to get you in even more trouble.”

Yes, but he smiled—or, what passes for a smile on Brian.

He leaves the room again, then comes back a few minutes later with a blanket he must have dragged off Matsumoto’s bed. I’m still naked and covered in the blood of our enemy. Brian wraps me in the blanket.

“After you eat, I want you to go up and take a shower, clean that blood off while I clean things up here.”

My gaze shifts to the dungeon shower, but Brian shakes his head. “No, you’ll be too distracting. I’ll never get anything done. Go upstairs. I had a look when I was up there. It’s a rain shower. It’s nice.”

I just nod. Brian needs to be in laser-focused body disposal mode. He’s got this from here. He doesn’t tell me how he would have died if he’d lost me. He doesn’t say sweet words of love, or even the word love. He can’t. But I felt him. I know. I feel the thread that connects us. I felt it vibrate and then pull tight against the tension of our possible fate. As though someone or something was there, poised to cut the thread of our lives, but then took Matsumoto’s instead.

I’m not sure how Brian feels about the sex, except that he came and I came. That’s about the extent of my wisdom on this subject currently. But he doesn’t bring it up. And if he decides to, it won’t be while he’s concerning himself with getting rid of two bodies and removing all evidence that we were ever here.

He leaves the room again while I sit with my snack and my thoughts. How do *I* feel about the sex?

I’ve never liked intercourse. Even before I kept picking bad men who hurt me, it just wasn’t my thing. Maybe it was always the men, even before I started picking worse and worse partners, I think I was choosing selfish lovers from the beginning. Men who wanted to use me as a masturbatory tool—a sleeve to fuck in, to get off in as quickly as possible.

They didn’t care about me. They didn’t care about my pleasure. I was never the one in control or the one whose pleasure was prioritized. It was always him. As fast as humanly possible. It was as though these men were engaged in some sort of race against time... come before your life runs out. Hurry, hurry!

I never agreed to play that game.

They didn’t know the meaning of the word slow, or tender. I always felt guilty even being there, taking up space, as though my pleasure was something in the way. And so that part of me shut off before it could ever open. And I just thought... I didn’t like it.

But today, when I was in control, when I straddled Brian and rode him. When I was drunk on the power of turning the tables on Matsumoto, showing him what he couldn’t have while playing his plans against him. When I was impaled on Brian’s cock, it was different. Because it was Brian.

It was twisted and fucked up. But it was me. And it was him. And somehow despite this entire situation, I was able to have the first orgasm of my life from penetration. I’m not sure what this says about me. I’m not sure I want to know.

I don’t know if I’m more broken than before, or just broken in a more complex way. I wouldn’t know where to begin in the journey to become normal. But if I were normal, I don’t think I would fit together with Brian anymore, and I’d rather be with him than be normal.

He finally returns, thrilled to have found a chainsaw and heavy duty trash bags.

“I’m not sure you want to keep eating while I do this. Blood splatter,” he says.

I shrug and pull back the blanket revealing the considerable amount of Matsumoto’s blood I’m

already wearing. It decorates my body like war paint. But maybe Brian is right.

I keep waiting for the normal emotional response, and every second it doesn't come I feel less and less human. I feel like I exist in the same half-life as Brian does. But is that such a bad thing? It's our world, and as long as we're in it together, everything is somehow still okay.

Aside from the adrenaline, which calms more with each cracker sandwich I eat, I'm not a shaking hot mess. I'm not crying. I didn't have some meltdown. Despite how destroyed I'd be if I lost Brian, I didn't lose him, and so I can't seem to call up the emotions that the potential of losing him should cause.

Brian leaves again and comes back, happy this time to have found a giant blue tarp that had been covering a boat on the property. Honestly this is the happiest I think I've ever seen him, and I'm not sure if it's because I'm safe or because he gets to cut up some bodies. Maybe it's a bit of both.

"I-I think I'm broken. For real this time," I say, as he unshackles Matsumoto and lays his body out on the tarp for disassembly.

He turns to me and levels me with a long hard stare. "Well, I think you're a glorious badass."

This draws a small smile out of me. Then I do feel something, a little warmth in my belly, a flush of pride that despite his determination to punish me and reclaim control of our dynamic, that he's proud of me and sees something good in what I've become.

I've finished my crackers by the time he drags the guard inside, and without a word I go follow Brian's directive about the shower. I grab my black bag which I hid behind a plant when I saw the guard. I knew it was foolish to think I could bring obvious weapons here, but I didn't think Matsumoto would expect me to come packing heat anyway. So maybe he wouldn't even have a security detail. There was only one guard, which in some ways proved my point. His father was always surrounded by bodyguards, and I know he was no different. But my weapons were in my bag and the lone guard was already pointing his gun at me.

So I'd gone with seduction, and while he was distracted, I'd pulled the capped syringe from the place I'd sewn into the back of my corset to hold it. I felt proud of myself for figuring out a way to alter the inner lining of the corset so that when I pulled the syringe, the cap stayed behind. If I'd had to fumble with it, the temporary distraction never would have worked.

And I couldn't conceal the syringe on my body without the cap or else I risked injecting myself with the drug and being rendered completely helpless against whatever they decided to do with me.

I take the bag upstairs to the main floor and the master bathroom. I wonder absently if this is a secondary vacation home or if he rented it or borrowed it from a friend. I drop the bag on top of the bed and step into the shower. I'm only now realizing that when I'd finished my crackers, I just walked out of the room completely naked.

Old Mina never would have wandered anywhere, even alone, totally naked like that. She would have put some kind of clothes on, even the corset. Or she would have stayed wrapped in the comforting cocoon of the blanket. But I'd shed that without a thought like the new darker butterfly I'm becoming.

I barely feel the shower spray. There's a sort of muted dullness that has overtaken all my senses. It started in Japan and had crystallized by the time we got back to the house. And today, with Matsumoto's death, another layer of whatever this is, has wound itself around me. I feel like I'm falling down a dark well with no way to climb back out. And a part of me doesn't care. I'm dimly aware that this part that doesn't care is the pretty poison of the numbing.

I'm not sure if this is better or worse than the pain and fear I lived in as Mina version 1.0. I can see the protection of it, the utility of it. Had I been that Mina, no way could I have just walked in here

like a badass, used the promise of my body to incapacitate a guard, and taken Matsumoto out without blinking. But there is a price, that thick cocoon wrapped around me. The way everything mutes into dull gray.

The way food tastes... less. Smells go unnoticed. The water falling on me feels as though it's falling on a layer of plastic wrapping that stands between me and the pure experience of it and the rest of life as I knew it. I stare down at the blood running in watered-down rivulets down my skin, swirling and finally going down the drain. If only I could wash all my damage off so easily.

BRIAN

I've gotten the dungeon sprayed down and bleached, the tarp folded, the bodies chopped up, and everything that remains from two men is in about thirty heavy duty garbage bags. It's almost like the inventors of these bags made them with body disposal in mind because I've been a satisfied customer for well over a decade now. Opaque. No leaks. Sturdy.

It's always a bad sign—for the captive—when there's a drain in the floor of the dungeon. That means someone plans for someone to bleed. This feature did make clean-up neater though.

I glance up to find Mina standing in the doorway, her hair still wet from the shower. She's wearing black leather pants and a black corset with dark red lace overlaid.

I swallow hard against the sudden dryness in my throat. I didn't realize she had a change of clothes. She always planned to walk away from this. I gesture to the lingerie Matsumoto made her wear. "I assume you want those burned?" I ask.

"Keep them. I want to remember today."

She wants a trophy. That's my girl.

I just nod. "I assume you drove here?"

"The gold sedan."

She's been paying attention. I nod and start hauling the garbage bags out to the car. Mina surprises me by picking up one of the lighter weight ones.

"Oh my god, what do you have in these bags? A body?"

I laugh out loud at this. I've known since Japan she was becoming more like me, that something irrevocable changed for her there, but I didn't realize she'd also taken on my twisted sense of humor during this transformation.

Our dynamic has changed. She still calls me Master in the bedroom, and upstairs in front of the other girls, as though she understands we must keep up these appearances. But she doesn't do it outside of those contexts, and I haven't called her on it because it feels artificial to maintain such formality between us. After all, there's no question who she belongs to. What we have outside the bedroom is something different, and nowhere is that more clear than what happened today.

A slave does not blaze in and save the day. She doesn't get revenge. She doesn't enact violence so unflinchingly. She certainly doesn't straddle and ride her master of her own volition right in front of the monster she's in the process of killing.

When we finish loading the car with her things and my bags and tarp, I shut the trunk and open her door for her.

She pauses and really looks at me. "Brian? Are you okay?"

Brian. She has never uttered my first name. There is no woman at the house brave enough to call me by my first name. It's *Sir* to everyone else and *Master* to Mina. Officially in the kink world, this signifies a deeper relationship between us and not that she's of some *lower rank* than everyone else at the house. She belongs to me and that comes with certain privileges and protection.

I nod, just staring at her. I level that hard look on her that so many before her have shrank and cringed from. This look alone has sent women to their knees sobbing and begging for my mercy—as though I have such a thing to give out.

But Mina stands there under the power of my stare, unflinching.

I grip the back of her neck and pull her close, my mouth at her ear. “When we get home to the dungeon and your punishment, you’ll be offering me a title.”

She shudders under me, but I know it's arousal, not fear. I lick the side of her throat then pull back and practically growl, “Get in the car.”

Her gaze is filled with lust, as she slides into the seat.

The ride home is silent. She doesn't ask about the bodies in the trunk. There are times when it feels safer to dispose of the evidence in the incinerator in the dungeon rather than leave it out in the wild somewhere to be dug up by coyotes or pulled in by a fisherman's net.

I haven't had a proper meal in a few days so I stop at a drive thru and get us some burgers and fries and chocolate shakes. We sit in the parking lot and eat. I don't have any words for what happened today. And Mina seems to be equally empty of the desire to communicate.

Any other couple—and in our own fucked-up way, that's what we are—would talk for days about this event, and their feelings, and how they planned to move forward, and how grateful they were to still have each other. They'd wring their hands about their monsters and demons as their subconscious mind took a turn at tormenting them and the nightmares came.

But Mina and I don't deal with things like that. Probably the biggest talk about my feelings I ever had with her was on the plane back from Japan, when I declared probably the closest thing to love I'm capable of.

When we get back on the road, I finally speak. “What happened down there can never happen again,” I say.

I'm not sure if she knows what I mean. Surely she doesn't think I think she's going to be rescuing me and killing our enemies as a running theme. Not if I can help it.

But I decide to clarify. “You know we can't fuck.”

We've had this discussion before. I'm not able to make love with a woman or even have sex with a woman. If I fuck you, it's violent and dark and obscene. And I don't want Mina at the other side of that rage. It's not even the fun dark kinky kind of fucking. It's just pure fury. I can't do that to her.

She doesn't reply, and I let it go. It probably didn't need to be said. I'm sure it was a one-time event.

After a few minutes, she speaks again. “When Matsumoto sent the letter, there was a little black thing in it. He said it was a tracking device, and that he now knew where the house was and if I didn't come, he'd send men to raid the house, kill everyone else, and take me. That's not why I came. I was coming for that fucker anyway. It's important to me that you know that.”

I nod and sigh. “I'll take a look at it when we get back.” It was probably a bluff. Matsumoto didn't bring a team with him, just the one bodyguard, but I'll double check to make sure there's no one else we need to take out to keep the house safe.

Either way, I need to let Gabe know, no more mail can be brought to the house. Technology has advanced too far, and shit like this could become a threat. All mail needs to be dealt with and handled

off site.

The best part of the day is arriving back at the house and watching the terrified gaping faces of everyone from the girls to the trainers, to the guys, to Phyllis staring at us in shock and horror as we bring in bag after bag after bag of what they all know are body parts.

Lindsay is the only one who has words to speak, because of course he does.

“How did she get off the property? We were worried sick.”

“Sure you were, Doc.” He was worried about her ratting out the house was what he was worried about. As far as I’m concerned, Mina has earned the right to be a free-range kitty. Her security bracelet won’t be going back on. She could have run. But she didn’t. She could have just let me rot. And now she’s a felon. She’s one of us now.

Mina laughs. “You didn’t give a shit about Brian so why give one about me?”

Everyone in the house actually take a step back from her when she speaks. It’s the same fear they have around me, and it makes me ridiculously happy to see it. Even the shrink finds her threatening which thrills me all the way to the center of my black heart.

“Our girl killed two men today,” I say, flashing them what I’m sure is my most maniacal grin. “I’m so proud.”

More shock. Annette is actually hiding behind Anton. But when I look at Mina, she looks hurt that they’re reacting to her this way. I take her hand and squeeze it.

“Come on,” I say when she turns her attention to me.

A part of me wants to punish everyone here treating her like she’s a threat to them. They’re all so fragile and weak. Normal People. They can’t handle blood or pain or death. They can’t stand to look under the surface of their nice safe life. They believe whatever the people on the TV news box tells them. They believe we live in a world of justice and clearly defined good and evil. And that the good guys always win.

And they will never let someone like me or now Mina pollute or corrupt this happy delusional lie.

Mina picks up a bag and follows me downstairs to the incinerator.

MINA

Brian has me in Cell C, stripped naked and tied to a pole in the middle of the room, facing it. He prowls around me with a single-tail whip. He's not playing around. A shiver goes down my spine, but I can't call forth the same fear all the others have toward this man.

I've slept in his bed. I've seen him cry. I've held him after nightmares and run with him on the treadmill. I've shared dirty filthy experiences with him and all my vulnerabilities. He's killed for me. He's punished for me. So even though I know this won't be a slap on the wrist, I'm not afraid of this man.

"Tell me, Mina, what are you being punished for?"

His voice has gone to that low terrifying register that would send anyone else into a flurry of panic but just excites me.

"For being a badass?" I quip, looking over my shoulder at him.

He chuckles.

"No. For putting yourself in danger and risking your life for me."

"You'd do it for me."

"It's not the same."

I want to ask him why it's not the same. How is it not the same? We're the same. We share mirroring scars, echoes of each other, like energetic threads that pulled us together until our fates entwined. We've both been abused, betrayed, traumatized, abandoned in different ways.

But I can feel Brian closing off to me, and I know he's finished with this discussion. He doesn't want to talk about why it's not the same, why I can't risk myself for him when he'd do it for me.

I jump when the whip cracks. It doesn't hit me, but only because he isn't aiming for me.

"There's the fear I like." His whisper carries across the cell before he reaches me, then he's there, his hand gripping around my throat, forcing me to arch back so he can lick the side of my neck. This is a signature Brian move, and with most I think he does it just to be creepy. With me it's edged with something more intimate and animalistic.

"I could flay you open with this whip," he whispers, dragging it up so the leather grazes over my naked body. It draws another shiver from me. "I'm going to make you bleed, but I have other plans."

This gets my attention. I knew he'd punish me, but the idea that Brian would ever make me bleed is something I'd never truly considered. It feels like betrayal after everything we've both been through.

"Master?"

He smirks at my newfound respect for the power dynamic currently in play. "I knew my lost lamb

was in there somewhere. So frightened and eager to please. You know what a fan I am of frightened and eager to please. You've heard the screams in the dungeon." His hand trails lower, over my breasts, down my belly, finally settling between my legs.

A moan slips past my lips as he strokes me there. He continues to tease and toy with me until I'm just on the edge, until I could come with the slightest additional provocation, until I'm on the edge of begging him for it. But then he pulls his hand away.

"Master, please..." I whimper.

"Do you think we're here to pleasure you? After what you did today?"

His voice has taken on that hard edge again.

"N-no, Master."

I jump as he flings the whip across the room and goes to the table with all the sharp and pointy things. He notices me watching him and comes blazing back, his mouth pressed against my ear.

"Did I tell you you could watch? That would spoil everything. Close your eyes."

I do as he commands, and a moment later he's tied a blindfold over my eyes.

"Brian?"

"What did you just call me?"

"Master... you're scaring me."

He only laughs at this. He's gone into that zone. Part of me fears he's put me in the category with all the other bad girls he hurts. And now I am terrified.

But I'm also grateful. This real, sharp, clean, harsh feeling. It's not muted and bubble wrapped. It's not hidden behind layers of thick cotton. Still, I wish it was a brighter, happier feeling that pulls me from the edge of the abyss, pulling me back into parts of myself I'd lost.

I hear him leave the cell, but a few minutes later he's back. I gasp as I feel the cold hard steel of a blade pressed flat against my back.

"Master... are you going to hurt me?"

"Is that what you need to be a good girl?"

I forgot how terrifying this man could be. I forgot just how dark when it wasn't aimed at me. And I find myself suddenly afraid he's gone so deep into that twisted place inside himself that maybe he isn't fully aware of who he has tied up. Maybe right now I'm just another piece of flesh bound for him to torture and break.

Then music begins to play. It's Chopin's Nocturne number 2. I somehow know he's got it on repeat. It's the music he listens to, to chase the monsters away—music his mother gave him. It's the music he gave me anonymously when I first came to the house, to help chase my monsters away.

He strokes my trembling back with his other hand. "Shhhhh. You'll survive me."

And then the tears come. I haven't cried in months. About anything. The tears have all been trapped inside me. I couldn't find a way to make them come out, but now they flow freely. Brian just touches my back gently while I cry. Finally, I take a long deep breath and blow it out slowly.

"Are you ready to begin?" he asks.

"Yes, Master."

He drags the blade across my flesh over and over. The pain slicing through so many layers of numbness, and I can feel again, even if it may not be forever, it's now. Now and when I fucked Brian in the dungeon in front of Matsumoto.

It takes me almost a full minute to realize, he's not just cutting me for the hell of it... he's making letters.

"Master, please," I whisper around the tears. But I don't know what I'm begging him for.

I'm so caught up in this eternal now of vulnerability and pain, that I don't realize it's over until he turns off the music, removes the blindfold, and presses a kiss to my cheek as though this were a totally normal thing for two people to do.

He unties me and carries me out of the cell, through our bedroom, to the large bathroom. He turns me so I can see my back in the mirror. The word *Mine* is carved into my skin.

I can't stop the smile as it quirks up to one side. It's perfect. No one but Brian could make something so macabre look like art. It'll leave a scar—this word on my back, forever. Everything about this feels right.

“Are you all right? Do you feel light headed?”

“I'm fine, Master.”

He leaves and comes back with a small orange juice from the mini-fridge in our room. “Drink this anyway.”

I have to fight the eye roll, but I drink to appease him. Then he draws me a warm, but not too hot bath. I hiss anyway as I sink down into the water.

“Motherfucker!” I say.

He arches a brow.

“I just mean in general. Not you.” Maybe him a little bit. He *is* the one who caused the pain after all. “You could have gotten me branded or tattooed like a civilized person,” I say.

Brian just watches me from across the room. “It wouldn't have been the same, and you know it.”

I lean against the tub, hissing again until I find a way to lay that doesn't hurt and close my eyes. I don't hear him approach. He's silent like the predator he is. I don't realize he's sitting on the edge of the tub until his hand is in the water, trailing over various parts of my body, teasing me until finally he begins to stroke between my thighs.

“Who do you belong to, Mina?”

“You, Master.” It comes out on a breathy sigh as my hips rise up to meet his questing fingers.

“Who are you going to come for like a good girl?”

“You, Master.” This time, it's a moan. I know he wants to hear that title. I'm surprised part of his punishment wasn't for me calling him by his first name. He'd looked surprised when I'd said it earlier today, but not bothered. But I think we both know it's better to keep up appearances at the house that this is a one hundred percent every second of every day sort of ownership, even though I think we both know it's evolved into something else.

He pumps fingers inside me as his thumb strokes over my clit and I fuck myself on those fingers.

“Please...”

“I own you. I own this cunt. I own your orgasm. Are we clear?”

“Yes, Master,” I whisper.

Every time I say that word, he becomes more aggressive, more intent on pulling my pleasure from me.

“Now,” he growls.

I didn't realize I was waiting for permission to come until he granted it. I buck harder against him, my scream filling the bathroom as the contractions of my orgasm overtake me.

After a few moments he pulls his hand from the water. “You didn't scream that loud in the dungeon.”

He helps me out of the tub, dries me off, and puts a salve and bandages on my back, then he tucks me into bed and leaves the room.

He returns about fifteen minutes later with dinner from the cafeteria. Phyllis made Lasagna and

homemade garlic bread tonight. She probably made salads as well but Brian must have decided to leave the rabbit food for the rabbits, choosing instead to bring us both the heartier fare.

We eat quietly, and watch a little TV. Then he pulls me into his arms and we sleep.

BRIAN

I wake in total darkness, not unusual for an underground room with no windows. I can't remember if I was dreaming, if a nightmare pulled me up from the depths. Will I need to run on the treadmill to get back to sleep? I wait, breathing into the quiet of the room, but no memories that I need to run from surface.

I panic for a moment realizing I'm on my back, my wrists shackled to the headboard. I quickly also become aware that my legs are splayed and tied down. I sleep naked so I have the urge to protect my most vulnerable spots, but it's not an option at the moment.

"Shhhhh."

Even in the darkness I know it's her. Mina. The fact that it's her, calms me a little.

"Once you're truly out, you sleep like the dead," she says.

It's true. It's not that I'm a light sleeper. It's that nightmares often wake me. They come less with Mina in bed beside me, but they still come sometimes.

Slowly the room becomes illuminated as she lights candle after candle. I'm immediately concerned about fire hazards, but each candle is on a flat surface inside a larger glass container. It doesn't get much safer than that. Still I feel on edge. I don't know if it's the fire, being tied up, or waking so abruptly to this situation.

"You planning to set me on fire? Got a taste for revenge, now?"

She laughs and shakes her head. There's a small amount of relief there. Maybe if Mina took me out, it wouldn't be so bad, but I no longer fully know what to expect from her or what she's capable of.

She's not the same woman she was when we met. I remember that first night, after our gazes first locked almost the moment she stepped inside the house, after I took her food up to her because I just wanted to be near her again... I remember she'd wandered downstairs. I'd just shattered a mirror and bandaged my hand. I stepped out into the hallway, and there she was, frozen with prey animal stillness, like a rabbit in a wide open field just waiting to be eaten or spared.

The predator in me was on full alert, but I didn't want her blood. I wanted something equally primal, but much more carnal. She smelled like honeysuckle and lilacs that night. She wore completely innocent pajamas, but I wanted to strip her bare and... and what? Fuck her?

That urge startled me. I sniffed her like an animal with a piece of meat and licked the side of her throat, then whispered the only word I could choke out: "Run."

It unfroze her and she fled me. I spent the next half hour in the shower with my undamaged hand, trying not to think about how innocent and frightened she was, and how much I wanted her, and how

her honeysuckle and lilac scent was still wrapped around me, taunting me even under the shower's spray.

That woman and this one are worlds apart. There's a new confidence in her. She's wearing some of the sexiest black lingerie I've ever seen. She must have ordered it to surprise me when I came back. I wonder how long it sat in the box, while I was gone far longer than I should have been.

The bra is cut out around the nipples, and the panties are crotch-less. It's the most naked a woman can be and still be wearing so much. She wears a matching garter belt, stockings—which I bet has those seams down the back. And black high heels—the Louboutins I bought her for Christmas. Black shoes with red soles. The ones that make her feel like she's walking on money.

A sheer black robe completes this look. My gaze is drawn to the collar I had made for her when I first bought her. It's platinum with a filigree design in some of the metal and glimmering black stones.

She drops the robe and slinks toward me like a cat. She glances down as if assessing and determining if I meet with her approval. I take in a sharp breath when her red fingernails skim feather-light over my chest, my abs, and then over my now rod-hard cock.

"Mina," I gasp out. "What are you doing?"

In answer, she straddles me and sinks down on my cock. She's so wet, but still, it's a tight fit. It must hurt her a little, and that idea excites me. I didn't notice so much when we were in Matsumoto's rental dungeon. I was too shocked it was happening. It's obvious I'm the first man she's fucked in a very long time, and I'm afraid I won't be able to hold out long like this.

She leans closer, her hands wrapping around my wrists as she stares down into my eyes and rides me. If another woman attempted this suicidal seduction, she'd be in bags in the incinerator the next morning. The intimacy of this moment is so intense, I don't think I could share it with anyone else and allow them to live to hold the memory of it.

"What are you doing?" I ask again. "We've talked about this... Fucking from me is not a compliment."

Her reply is smooth silk. "Then it's a good thing you're not the one giving the compliment."

God, who is this woman?

"Now be good, and listen," she says, putting a finger over my lips to hush me. She moans as I surprise her by sucking her finger into my mouth.

"I could bite it off," I growl around the finger.

But she doesn't buy my empty threat. She just laughs. "Come on, Brian. We both know you like me fully assembled."

I'd thought taking her to the dungeon and punishing her would reset our dynamic. Obviously not.

She pulls her finger away and rides me more slowly now, her hands on my chest as her breathing deepens.

"Mina... do you not want... what we had? We can't... you know I can't..."

She glances down at our joined bodies and then back up to me. "It seems like you more than... can." She punctuates that last word with her hips as she grinds down even harder, drawing a sharp sound from me.

"You know what I mean."

"Motherfuck... am I going to have to gag you?"

I actually laugh at this. There is no woman on this planet with the bravery to tie me up and then threaten to gag me.

"I have a plan," She continues. "You don't fuck me. I fuck you. I'll tie you up, so you can't get out of hand."

“But you have to untie me eventually.”

She leans close, her mouth an inch from mine and whispers. “I’ll fuck you until you’re too wiped out to do anything more.”

I groan at that. She smells now like those Red Hots cinnamon candies, the lilac and honeysuckle of the past long gone. My hips arch up to meet her. I want my hands free so I can drive into her, but I don’t trust myself. Even now I don’t trust myself fully with her.

She captures my mouth in a kiss, and now I’m sure I’m not imagining this cinnamon candy smell.

“Did you eat Red Hots?”

Mina pulls away from me and smirks. “I stole some of Annette’s leftover Valentine’s Candies.”

I hate all holidays, but Valentine’s Day is the worst, most useless holiday ever invented. Though the original pagan version, where men chased women around whipping them... I like that one.

“Promise me we aren’t going to become one of those sweet *hearts and flowers* couples.”

“Oh, come on, you know you want to slow dance with me while Frank Sinatra croons, My Funny Valentine.”

“I would rather be tortured to death.” These probably aren’t the wisest words to say to a woman who killed two men today and now has me chained down. She could have gotten a taste for it.

She leans down to lick the side of my throat, her hips still moving, milking me.

“Stealing my moves?” I ask.

She shrugs. “This is what I want. Sex with you, like this. Then everything else the way it was. I’ll be the good little girl and call you master in front of the others, and when we play. But when I’m on top, I’m on top. Do we understand each other?” Her voice is a low, seductive purr.

I should fight this. I shouldn’t let her have it, but the truth is, I like this wild, free side of her. I like the part of her that killed without flinching and helped me carry the bags of body parts to the car, the part that didn’t fall to pieces. The part that was there with me, fierce and strong and sexy as hell.

As if reading my mind she says... “You can still have the sweet begging side of me. I can still be the good girl, but don’t you also want me to be the bad girl... just a little bit?”

Her fingernails score my flesh as they run down my chest drawing blood, and I cry out. It’s the thing that drives me over the edge—that sharp slice of pain mixed with the pleasure—and then I’m spilling into her. She grinds against me harder, wringing me out, taking her own pleasure on the tail end of mine. And the noises she makes... When she’s had her fill, she collapses on top of me.

“Unchain me,” I say. The words come out like gravel.

“Master?”

Yeah she knows she’s in trouble.

I chuckle. “Oh, we’re back to respect now are we? You think that’ll save you? Don’t worry, it won’t be tonight, but I’ve got a running list of your infractions, and there will be consequences.”

She shivers against me as she rises to look in my eyes to see just how much trouble she’s in. Her long dark hair tickles my chest. I raise a brow at her, and she scrambles to get the key and unlock the shackles binding me. This act may be her bravest one today. Unchaining me after that is braver than fucking me in the first place. It’s even braver than what she did earlier today.

I rise slowly from the bed, but I don’t go for her. Instead I say, “Take all that off and get in bed. It’s late.”

She just nods and goes to unhook the bra while I blow out the candles and join her. In the darkness I pull her to me, our bodies entwined together. She doesn’t try to *talk about her feelings* or get me to talk about mine.

We’re just silent, feeling each other’s warmth and breath. Never have I been more happy to have a

vasectomy. I'm pretty sure all of the owners at the house have had it done. Our lifestyle isn't exactly a child-friendly environment. I wouldn't scar a kid with this place. That's not even counting what a mini-me might be like. I don't think he'd become a sociopath by way of genetics, but I'm not sure a kid could be around me for very long without turning into one in the long term. I mean, look at Mina.

This time when I drift off to sleep, it's not a blank blackness. Instead, I dream vivid, lush, beautiful dreams of all the punishments my girl has coming. The screams, the sweet begging, her pleasure. She'll give it all to me.

THE END



I HOPE you enjoyed THE EASTER HUNT. This is the first novella in BRIAN AND MINA'S HOLIDAY HITS. The next novella in the series is BLOWING THINGS UP and the events of the story happen around the fourth of July. There will be five, total, ending at Valentine's Day.

FOR MORE BRIAN AND MINA, you can also read The Pleasure House Collection. It's in separate books, starting with Guilty Pleasures, or you can grab the box set of the whole collection. Brian and Mina's origin story is the second one, Broken Dolls. (You can read Broken Dolls without having read the first book if you haven't read their story and want to get to that first!)

<https://kittythomas.com/book-series/pleasure-house/>

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TURN the page for Behind The Scenes on The Easter Hunt...

BEHIND-THE-SCENES WITH KITTY

Hello my little caramel-filled chocolate eggs,

Every time I wrote a book in the Pleasure House, from the very first one, I thought... “This one’s the last one”. And when I finished *Twisted Pleasures*, I thought I was done with this world. Yes, there was a little bit of a tie in that came in the second book of the Dark Arts duet with a few small cameos, okay, but mainly I was done with the world.

Until I got the idea for a Brian and Mina novella series. In the Pleasure House, we see a shift happen with Mina at the end of *Broken Dolls*. We know something major has happened inside her psyche, but we only have the tiniest hint of what. Then in *Surrender*, we see her, already the badass when Julie (Gabe’s girl) comes to the house.

And then this continues in the background of *Twisted Fates*. But there’s a giant question mark looming between how we got from who she is at the end of *Broken Dolls* to how she is in the background of Gabe and Julie’s story. So I wanted to do this side series. It would be episodic like a TV show but with a larger arc for the characters. And I knew I wanted it to be about these hit jobs they go on together. Sort of “The Secret lives of Brian and Mina”, but obviously I wasn’t calling it that. But it wasn’t talking to me, which is strange, because after *Guilty Pleasures* Brian wouldn’t shut the fuck up trying to convince me to give him a book of his own. I held strong for three whole years before I caved.

I had no title for the series, no title for any of the books. I thought I wanted to do probably 5. When you add up 5 novellas you’ve got almost an epic novel with these two and I knew Brian was a reader favorite. But nothing was coming.

Then I got this idea around the holidays in 2021. The title “Brian and Mina’s Holiday Hits” popped into my head and I laughed so hard. Because you hear that and you’re like... oh yeah... we’re about to get all cozy by the fire, listen to some holiday music, have some cocoa, and decorate a tree.

Nope. More like take out some people and destroy the evidence. Brian and Mina are not a singing duo.

Soon after that, the holidays I wanted to feature came to me. And the titles. My mom came up with the title for the Halloween one, and it’s great. If you’re reading or listening to this when the whole series is out, you can go look up the title, but otherwise I want to keep these under wraps until they’re ready to release... keep a little bit of mystery going.

Originally I’d wanted to do the Yuletide one first. But, the time crunch was too close and it was going to stress me the hell out. And I had no big inspiration for actual content in time for Valentine’s day either.

Right after Valentine's Day, most of the plot for The Easter Hunt popped into my head and it became clear why the Easter book needed to be the first one, and why the writing gods had been silent. Soon after that, the series ending came to me and it is SO perfect.

I'm so excited to share these stories with you. You'll get the most out of it if you read Brian and Mina's backstory, which is Broken Dolls inside the Pleasure House world. You don't have to have read the whole Pleasure House, but Brian is in all of them, so you'll probably want to.

Thank you so much for supporting my work. Don't forget to check out kittythomas.com for information on all the things. There you can sign up for my newsletter and get a free ebook, or you can also subscribe to my blog. Both are great to stay in the know of when new stuff is coming.

Love,
Kitty ^^

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