



Winter, a professional thief who can manipulate others' biologies by touch, accidentally "healed" her former partner – and former vampire – Sebastian, whom she secretly loves. Her healing created a symbiotic pairing between them that neither of them wants.

Nathanial, a sexy thousand-year-old vampire and Sebastian's ex-lover, talks Sebastian and Winter into stealing evidence that will expose all vampires to the world. But Nathanial is a puppet-master who doesn't believe in falling in love with humans, leaving Winter unsure of his real feelings for her once he seduces her, or how he feels about Sebastian, the former vampire-now-human whose life he has turned upside down once more.

But the evidence they steal is hot property. The future of all vampires is on the line and others will stop at nothing to get it, leaving Sebastian, Winter and Nathanial with no allies but each other. They must trust each other to survive. Only...can they?

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# Blood & Knot

by

Tracy Cooper-Posey



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*To Mark, Terry, Matthew Kate.  
Pippin, Merry, Sam, Strider.  
The entire family, who put up with me.  
Endlessly. Eternal patience.*

*Thank you.*

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## Chapter One

HE GOT THE drop on her, but he was a vampire so he had the advantage of speed and stealth. Too, he was only the second vampire Winter had ever met. Just like Sebastian, this one posed as human, but Singapore had made Winter smarter in one foul night.

He came up behind her as she was stuffing the last of the foil food packages into her backpack. Winter was working on the bench in her shed, thinking about trails and weather and the weight of her pack. She had let her guard down, which was a mistake. Just because Helena, Montana, wasn't New York, New York and she was technically retired didn't mean a thing to others in the thievery business.

The floor of the shed was sand, with liberal splashes of old machine oil that gave the shed a musty aroma that always made Winter think of men swearing as they worked on their vehicles, stripped to the waist and kicking the tires for good measure. She liked working in the shed. It made her feel industrious.

The oil and dirt also made the vampire's approach silent. Instead, a change in the quality of the early morning light filtering through the open double doors, glinting off the side of her black Ford Explorer sitting silently to her right had tipped her off. In her peripheral vision something had flickered –

She whirled, snatching the lug wrench up from the bench and kept turning.

The wrench slammed into the man's forearm. He'd been reaching for her. She saw startling blue eyes. Short black unruly hair. That was all she had time to register. He cried out in surprise and his arm was forced upwards by the impact of the wrench.

Winter ducked under his arm and took off, heading for the open doors of the shed. It meant moving past his left hand, but she had surprised him. He might not react fast enough.

His hand snapped out, curling around her arm and bringing her to a halt with enough strength that she was yanked almost completely off her feet. Her breath pushed out of her.

Fear sizzled through her as he slammed her up against the Explorer. The *strength* in him! And she couldn't help the comparison, even though she hated herself for even thinking of it: Sebastian had never shown such strength. Had never hinted of such power, before.

Bitterness circled through her as she looked at the man's – the vampire's – face. Sebastian had been careful never to reveal his full power, she realized.

"You're a vampire," she concluded.

"Very good," he said, stepping away from her. He had an accent, a strange

one. She thought it might be Eastern European, but it had eroded so badly from either years or other cultures she would have to hear him speak further to know for sure.

He held out his hand. "If you don't mind? I did not come here to fight."

Winter shook her head. "I'll keep the wrench for now."

He smiled in a way that made it look like he was trying not to laugh. "As you wish." He shrugged. The shrug seemed to say, *Keep your toy. Don't keep it. It is irrelevant to me.*

Winter looked down at the wrench. She had hit him with enough force to break a normal man's arm and he had merely brushed her aside. With a grimace, she tossed the wrench onto the bench. She was going to have to rely on his word that he wasn't here to fight.

"Thank you," he said. He took another step back, putting a good two feet of space between them.

"I didn't put the wrench down for you." Winter wasn't fooled by the space. Once—just once—she had seen how fast Sebastian could react when he needed to. This man could close the space at a speed Winter would be hard put to follow with her naked eyes. This *vampire*.

He spread his hands in an amiable gesture. "You did not put the wrench down for me, but I thank you anyway." He dropped his hands to his sides once more. It was an easy, comfortable stance. Sebastian would have shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans by now. This one wasn't wearing jeans, though. He had on what looked like a pair of dark grey or black suede trousers and a black leather jacket. That was all the detail she could make out in the low light of the shed.

"I did not mean to startle you," he continued. "You were concentrating on your task. I called your name, but you didn't respond."

"You lie," she said flatly. "The dog would have warned me if your approach had been so open."

"The dog?" He smiled. "I see that Sebastian was not entirely forthcoming about our nature." He turned his head to look toward the open shed door.

After a few seconds, her big German Shepherd, Prince, trotted inside and over to the man. He sat in front of him and looked up with his tongue hanging out.

The man patted Prince's head.

Winter stared at the massive dog, who had an uneven temper and had snapped at her once or twice. Now Prince licked the vampire's hand and gave little whines.

"His name is Steffen, by the way, not Prince."

Winter gave a short laugh. "Says who?"

"He does." The man shrugged again. "These are pack creatures. You need to be a master to him, not a mother. That is why he gets confused at times and snaps." He glanced at the door. "Go now," he told the dog.

Prince—Steffen—turned and trotted out of the shed again, his bushy tail

wagging.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "And what do you want?"

He straightened, brushing dog hairs from his hand. "Perhaps we should discuss this inside."

"Too dirty for you here?" she asked sweetly. She shook her head. "You're not stepping foot inside my house." She let her smile widen. "We can sit outside if you like. I have a table and chairs on the front deck."

He glanced out at the steadily brightening day. "No, thank you." He brought his gaze back to her. His eyes seemed luminous and she wondered if it was just a trick of the light. "But you already knew I would refuse, didn't you? A fact that Sebastian has chosen to impart, then."

"Nope." She crossed her arms. "But I've done a lot of thinking lately, digging through past events. Sebastian avoided direct sunlight when he could. He could walk around in sunlight and didn't explode or go up in flame, but he wasn't happy about it." Annoyance touched her. Why was she spilling her guts to this person, anyway? "You know Sebastian. You know him well enough to know his..." She hesitated. She could barely find an appropriate word for the precise relationship between them. "You know Sebastian well enough to know Sebastian might have revealed his true nature to me. I can think of very few people in Sebastian's life he might give that information to. And only one of them is a vampire."

The man stood watching her, his expression unmoving. He wasn't going to help her by offering any confirmation, or speaking the uncomfortable truth for her.

Winter gripped her elbows with her fingers, squeezing tightly. Her heart was racing. Too much adrenaline was pumping through her system. She reached inside, and counteracted the adrenaline with endorphins. She massaged her heart and brought her blood pressure back down to more normal levels. If this vampire was who she now suspected him to be, she was going to need every advantage, both physical and mental, she could muster to deal with him. Calm returned.

"If you are who I think you are," Winter told him, "then I do not understand why you are here."

"Who am I?" he asked, sounding curious.

"Nathanial."

He nodded.

She let out her breath. It sounded a little shaky, the last dregs of the adrenaline still affecting her. "I don't know why you are here, Nathanial. But then, I've learned I know nothing about anything, these last months." She paused as the shakiness seemed to leap inside her. A hot, hard thing. Demanding, like an itch she couldn't scratch. Or a need to be filled.

Quickly, she tried to adjust her body chemicals to deal with it. The biochemical mix was something new. Something she had never experienced. The physical symptoms it produced were compulsive. She could only dampen them

down partially, but it would have to do. Nathaniel would notice if she focused inwards for too long. She blinked and forced her attention back to the man in front of her.

Sebastian had told her very little about Nathaniel's true nature, except to say that he was centuries old. But in the years she and Sebastian had been working together, he had spoken many times about Nathaniel as a man – about his intellect and political scheming. Winter could experience for herself now the power of his personality. Even though Nathaniel simply stood in front of her, she could feel the way he was controlling the conversation. Leading her.

It annoyed her, but she wasn't sure how to wrest the conversation back to her agenda. She didn't *have* an agenda. He had come looking for her, after all. She had been caught flat-footed and now was back-pedaling madly.

And that was exactly what Sebastian used to complain about – how Nial would catch people unaware and leave them trailing in his mental dust. Manipulate them and make them do exactly what Nial wanted them to do. And oh, the *bitterness* in Sebastian's voice when he had talked about Nial's power to push people around that way...

And here she was, being moved around like a chess piece, exactly the way Sebastian despised. Winter was suddenly glad Sebastian wasn't around to see this.

She swallowed, her throat dry and raspy. "What do you want, Nathaniel?" She squeezed her arms again, digging her fingernails in. The peculiar surges were growing stronger.

Nathaniel shrugged, as if it were obvious. "I have come to find Sebastian."

This time, her laughter bubbled up from deep within some hard, aching place inside her. It spewed out before she could stop it. There wasn't a single shred of humor in the loud noise that exploded from her lips. Even Winter could feel the hysteria attached to it and fought to hang onto the shreds of her control. "What makes you think I have any idea where he is?" she cried. A shudder ran through her.

Nathaniel's eyes narrowed. "Gods above..." he breathed.

Abruptly he was suddenly *there*, right in front of her. So close, she shivered again as her own body heat bounced off him and warmed the space between them. She was hot. Too hot.

He pushed his hand into her hair, his thumb against her temple, controlling her head. He lifted it up and around so the light from the doorway fell on it. She winced.

"What are you?" he demanded.

Frightened, she tried to pull her head out of his grip. "Leave me alone." But she was weak. Weaker than usual. And Nathaniel was much, much stronger than a normal man. He was staring into her face. "You are not a vampire," he declared. "You are human."

She swallowed. "Yes."

"But you are gripped by blood-fever. I can see the symptoms for myself.

How can this be?" He dropped his hands from her face. "You need to feed. Now."

Coldness curled around the pit of her stomach. "No," she whispered. "It's too early."

Nathaniel's gaze seemed to scoop up every little skerrick of data she was giving him. She wished he was not here, storing all this evidence. But there was no help for it. Bad timing. Very bad timing. Still, while he was here, she could use him. "Is that what these symptoms are? Blood...?"

"Fever," he finished. "Did Sebastian not teach you this?" He lifted his thumb to his mouth and drew the ball of it across the edge of his teeth.

She licked her lips. "I haven't seen Sebastian for eight—" Ravenous need swept away her concentration, for Nathaniel had brought his thumb close to her face. There was blood on it.

She began to pant. The smell of leather and cashmere and a delicious spicy aroma enveloped her. She reached for him, for the strength she needed. The blood.

"Mine is not the blood you need." Low words breathed in her ear. "Tell me who's you need."

"Sebastian's." She felt a tear escape her eye.

"He would not have abandoned you to the blood fever, not knowingly." Nathaniel spoke softly in her ear.

"The house," Winter replied, feeling a helpless vulnerability at having to give Nathaniel this last secret. "The basement."

She felt herself being lifted. Then nothing more.

\* \* \* \* \*

Winter knew she was in her own basement before she opened her eyes. The sting of the IV needle was unmistakable. So was the quiet hum of the big laboratory refrigerator and the generator in the insulated furnace room that ran it.

"You were going to tell me you haven't seen Sebastian for eight months, weren't you?" Nathaniel said.

She opened her eyes and looked to the right, the direction his voice came from. Nathaniel was resting on a bar stool, his long legs thrust out in front of him. One elbow rested on the bar itself, behind him. He'd removed the leather jacket. Beneath, he wore a royal blue sweater in some fine material, with a v-neck. Cashmere, she suspected.

In the better lighting available in the basement, she could see his features more clearly. Sebastian had spent the nearly two years they had worked together building up a fearsome picture in Winter's mind of Nathaniel and his ways—a manipulative, powerful, remote man who stopped at nothing to get what he wanted. The last time she had seen Sebastian, he had revealed the rest: that Nial was at least a thousand years old and had lived that long because he was a crafty, scheming and self-interested vampire who had grown detached from the

human race.

What Sebastian had failed to add was that Nial – Nathaniel – looked like a man in his mid- to late thirties and was stunningly attractive. Winter could feel the pull of his magnetism despite knowing what she did about him.

His eyes were the blue of a cloudless summer day and almost as dazzling as one. He had a square, determined chin, perhaps the only part of his anatomy that hinted at his true nature. The rest of him was utterly distracting. His shoulders were wide and well muscled, the hips taut and the legs long and just as well developed as the shoulders. He'd pushed the sweater up his arms to his elbows and the forearms flexed, showing the play of tendons and muscles and veins. His wrists were wide and his hands were big, which matched his height. Winter judged him to be about six foot four, by the way he stood over her.

Now he stood again and came over to where she lay in the extended La-Z-Boy. "How often do you have to feed, Winter?"

"None of your business."

"It might be," he replied. "I checked the rest of the fridge. Current health guidelines for maximum storage limits of blood in a laboratory refrigerator is either twenty-one days or forty-two days, depending on who you want to listen to. You don't have a lot of Sebastian's blood here. One feed left, if you use all of the bag I put on the pole." He looked up at the IV pole next to her. "And you've just about drained it, so let's assume that you use a half-pint per feeding. That means you have one feeding left in the fridge."

"He'll send me more," Winter assured him. "He always does."

"Really? When was the last time you received any?"

She bit her lip. "About six weeks ago," she admitted.

"How often was he sending the blood before that?"

"Every three weeks."

"Every twenty-one days, in other words. National blood storage standards." Nathaniel curled his hand into a fist and let it unroll again, then flexed the fingers. "It didn't occur to you to contact him and ask him why he had stopped shipping his blood?"

An image flashed through her mind of speaking to Sebastian, and being in the same room with him, too fast to grasp and properly visualize it. Panic touched her.

Winter looked at Nathaniel. "Sebastian is the last person on earth I can bear to speak to, even if I must. I thought of it, yes. That's all I did."

Nathaniel eyes widened, but that was all the shock he showed. "You will not, even if not speaking to him will bring you to this?" he asked, waving his hand toward where she lay. "Blood fever and your eventual death?"

"Is that what will happen?" she asked dully. She shrugged.

Nathaniel frowned. With a soft word in a language she did not know, he strode over to the small dining table in the far corner, picked up one of the chairs and placed it next to her La-Z-Boy. He sat on the edge of the seat and leaned close to her, his elbows on his knees, his hands gripped together between them.

“What happened to you? To both of you?” he demanded. “A year ago, Winter Kennedy, you were living in New York and considered to be one of the world’s best acrobats.”

Winter rolled her eyes. “Quit with the pretty euphemisms, Nathaniel. I’m a thief. You’re a con man. Or at least you used to be once.”

Nathaniel nodded. “Very well. Plain speaking, if you insist. My question still stands. A year ago, you and Sebastian were considered to be the most effective team in the world, bar none. Now you tell me you haven’t see him for eight months. I know you both pulled off that Sumitomo Mitsui bank job in Singapore last June. That was eleven months ago. What has happened in between?”

Shocked slithered through her, cold and sobering. “What makes you think we did the Singapore contract?” she asked, making it sound casual. “That’s more along Pedro Salvomir’s line, big banks like that.”

“Twenty floors up, not a single guard hurt and no one can remember a damn thing?” Nathaniel smiled, showing very white and even teeth. “That would be enough to brand the job as yours, even if Sebastian himself hadn’t told me you two had taken the contract.”

“He told you?” She had run out of the capacity to be shocked any further and could only stare at him. “He met with you?” Surely Sebastian would have mentioned an occasion so momentous as meeting the man who had left such a huge scar on his life and his soul?

Nathaniel’s smile faded. “There is so much you have yet to learn, Winter Kennedy. Our kind don’t meet. Not if we can help it. It reduces risks.” He shook his head. A small movement. “He called me.”

She drew a shaky breath. “He called,” she repeated flatly. “And didn’t tell me.” She reached over to yank the fat needle out of the crook of her elbow. “Well, that fits the pattern. There’s bushels he didn’t tell me.”

Nathaniel’s hand came down on her shoulder, halting her. “Secrecy is necessary for our survival, Winter. After a while it becomes psychologically ingrained. You’ll understand all too soon.”

She pulled her shoulder out of his grip. “I’m not one of you.”

He smiled. “No, you’re not.” He sat back again, his hands threaded together between his knees, and let her pull her IV out. “What happened after the bank job?” he said. “Or was it the bank job that went wrong?”

Winter flinched. She couldn’t help it. She let the needle drop so it clanged softly against the pole. The blood bag was empty.

“The bank job, then,” Nathaniel concluded. “Tell me what happened.”

She shook her head. There was no way she was about to tell Nathaniel that tale. Sebastian was bitter and still licking the wounds he wore from his time with Nial, so Winter knew that anything he’d ever told her about the man had to be filtered and adjusted through his biases, but even adjusting for Sebastian’s prejudices meant that Nathaniel was a dangerous person to open up to. The habits of the con man had never left him and he stored people’s vulnerabilities

and secrets like currency, to be produced at later dates for negotiation.

Nathaniel gave a small hiss. "Sebastian is missing," he snapped. "Have you not grasped that yet? I didn't come here to pass the time of day with you." He stood abruptly and took two slow steps away from her, as if he were controlling himself.

"Missing?" She pushed the lounge into the upright position. "How do you know he's not off on some jaunt somewhere, brooding?"

He didn't look back at her. "Your blood supply has stopped, hasn't it?"

Winter bit her lip. Adrenaline was seeping back into her system and she corrected it again. Now was not the time to panic. This could be nothing. Sebastian hadn't spoken to her for eight months. "He's a grown man," Winter said, addressing Nathaniel's back. "He's...hell, I don't know how old he is. He wouldn't tell me. He's been taking care of himself for quite a while."

Nathaniel turned, then. "He was supposed to meet me last week. He didn't. Unlike human meetings, these meetings are sacrosanct in our world. You make them, or ensure a message is sent to let the other know you will not be there. You never just not show. Something is very wrong." He pointed at her. "There is something wrong with you, too, Winter. You know that."

She couldn't hold his gaze. She found herself looking away, at her knees in their worn jeans.

"Yes, you agree with me," he said softly. "Tell me what happened in Singapore. Then I might be able to begin to trace Sebastian..." He grimaced. "If it isn't already too late."

## Chapter Two

Sumitomo Mitsui Bank Commercial Depository, Raffles City Tower, Raffles Avenue, Singapore – Eleven months ago

THE JOB HAD almost been too easy. Right from the start Winter had been nervous about the set up, although Sebastian had kept reassuring her that if they systematically checked their security and kept to their normal procedures, then they would be able to cope with anything unexpected that came at them.

It was hard to pass up a two million dollar pay day. It bothered her that Pedro Slavomir had been first to pass, though. What had he seen about this job that she could not?

But the job had gone flawlessly. To begin, they had misdirected. It was inevitable that rumors might leak of a potential job. When the gossip emerged, it had been easy to draw attention to a more obvious target, the retail Sumitomo Mitsui Bank on Temasek Avenue. Very few people were aware of Sumitomo's new commercial facility in the Raffles tower, which easily surpassed the retail branch in turnover.

After cocktails and dancing in the Raffles Hotel, Sebastian and Winter had made their tipsy way to their hotel room around one a.m., looking for all the world like a couple about to spend the night in each other's arms. They were dressed just like other elegant Raffles guests. Winter wore a beaded blue evening gown that hugged her figure and glittered every time she moved. It had little straps over her shoulders to hold it up and there was discreet boning and support to make the most of her cleavage. A split in the dress ran up her left thigh, showing off her silk stockings and Jimmy Choo stilettos.

Sebastian was turning heads as usual. If they hadn't been working, he could have taken his pick of a dozen men or women who were doing everything but drool on his shoulder. He wore a dark charcoal suit that shouted good taste and expense. It made the most of his height and seemed to make a statement of the fact that he was a man who preferred the physical to the mental. Winter could feel it in her own responses to his good looks. She was aware of her own appearance and glad that she looked her best, even though she knew it was wasted on Sebastian. Lastly, he wore a black shirt and a dull green tie that gleamed and made the most of his blond hair and green eyes.

At just over six foot high, Sebastian stood out amongst the Raffles guests. Then, when he spoke and people heard his natural well-rounded English accent, the clean vowels, and his deep, thoughtful tones, they were mesmerized. If he happened to catch their gaze and speak to them directly, they were his. Hook,

line and sinker. Sebastian could do with them what he wanted after that. He merely had to smile and give them that sleepy, charming look of his and they would tumble into bed with him and think it was all their idea.

Winter had seen it so many times she had become inured to it now.

At least they were working tonight. She had grown used to being left sitting alone to find her own company but tonight...she couldn't put her finger on it. It would make a difference tonight.

Just after one a.m., they put aside the last of a long series of Martinis that had been discreetly poured into potted palms, washroom sinks and toilet bowls, spilt, and otherwise disposed of. Then they staggered up the elegant Raffles staircase, ostensibly heading for their room. As soon as they were out of sight of the hotel staff and guests, they straightened up and began to walk faster.

In two minutes they were standing at the door that led onto the roof of the hotel. Winter took off her stilettos and Sebastian removed his jacket. From his pockets he pulled a pair of light rubber pumps to protect her feet and give her some footing over the silk stockings. She hitched one side of the beaded gown up and clipped it to her hip. The other side was split, giving her room to move. Her hair, black as midnight, she normally kept in a short, simple hairstyle which made her work easier. She nodded to Sebastian.

He transferred his Glocks to the holsters under his arms and readjusted the straps now he could let them show, added the flick knife and other gear from the pockets of his jacket to loops and straps designed to hold them, which he had added to the holsters.

"Let's go," she murmured, and disabled the alarm on the door.

They slipped out onto the roof and dropped their shoes and jacket just outside the door. Winter took a breath, feeling the low grade fizz and buzz of excitement she always got these days when the job was on.

In thirteen minutes, they had breached the Raffles Tower and reached the twentieth floor. Security was tighter on the twentieth floor, as the Sumitomo Mitsui Banking Corporation had their own security.

Here, Winter and Sebastian split up, for each had their own assignments, matched to their skills. And Winter had things to do that she didn't want Sebastian to see.

Sebastian hesitated. "Be careful," he said in a murmur, breaking their usual silence. His eyes were narrowed, concentrating. She knew he was listening hard. His hearing was often phenomenal.

She scowled and gave him a push. *Go*. His task was inside the vault, this time.

Sebastian shook his head and left, moving fast and silently. He didn't look back.

After a moment while she tried to puzzle through his uncharacteristic break with practice, she turned and hurried down the wide, silent corridor she was in. This corridor, from the schematics they had been able to purchase, surrounded the vault and data centre on three sides. The fourth side of the vault and data

centre was the twenty floor drop to the street below. The guards strolled the corridor ceaselessly, in random patterns. The corporation didn't depend upon cameras. That factor, Winter bet, had been the one that had made Pedro Slavomir pass the job up. Given the peculiar conditions of the delivery that the contract demanded, it made it almost impossible, unless you had certain skills...

There was a guard up ahead, his back to her.

Winter unclipped her dress, dropping it back down so it looked normal. She shifted her walk, making it more seductive, pushing her hips forward. She smiled. When the guard turned around, he saw her and for two precious, startled seconds he hesitated, stunned to see a woman in evening wear shimmying her way towards him. Then his brain caught up with his instincts and reason took over. There was no possible way she could be in this corridor at this time of night unless she had overcome at least six security barriers.

He reached down and back for his gun, but it was too late, Winter was already within reach of him. She rested her hand on his arm on his arm. "It's alright," she soothed. "Everything's going to be okay."

He paused, gazing at her. "It is?"

She halted the flow of his endorphins she had sent streaming into his blood as soon as she had touched him. The adrenaline spike from seeing her had been countered now. He, like most men in security and military forces, had a highly responsive biology and was easy to manipulate. She concentrated instead on soothing chemicals. Calm and happy juices. "Sure is," she told him. "Everything's just fine. Why don't you sit down?"

She had learned long ago to make them sit, first. The bruises they got from falling raised too many questions later.

"Okay," he said happily and sat on the floor. He grinned up at her.

Winter reached into his mind, riffling through the acids and proteins there, looking for the most recent patterns. "You're not going to remember anything about me when you wake up later. You will wake refreshed from a short sleep and feel guilty about falling asleep on the job, but that's all." She found the sugars and fats that marked his most recent memories. "You won't remember anything out of the ordinary other than you fell asleep. And it was a lovely sleep."

"Okay."

She put him to sleep and lowered his head to the ground. He was smiling in his sleep and she quickly adjusted the memories she had found, smoothing out the patterns and spikes. Dreams from his sleep would take their place.

Winter stood up and took one of the syringes from the pouch on her hip. Sebastian and the few who knew of them thought they were her secret wonder drug, her personal weapon that knocked people cold and left them with no memory of events afterwards. This, in part, enhanced Winter Manon Kennedy's mighty reputation for breaking into the impossible-to-reach places, the unbreakable vaults, the unassailable locations.

If only they knew the truth. She grimaced and squirted the saline in the

syringe onto her dress where the beading would hide the wet patch and put the syringe back in her pouch. The guard was snoring now, still smiling. Under the closed lids, his eyes were moving rapidly backwards and forward in deep REM.

One down, seven to go.

She paused to adjust her own arousal. It was always this way. Touching others, reaching inside them, especially combined with a job, gave her a rush. At first, she had resented that it was so. Now she learned to accept that life had shaped circumstances and her in such a way that this was how she was. She tamped down the arousal enough to ignore it and moved on.

Eight minutes and forty seconds later, seven of the eight guards were sleeping peacefully. She couldn't find the eighth. He seemed to be eluding her. Finally, she rounded the corner of the last turn of the corridor, slowing down, her caution ratcheted up high. There was nowhere else the guard could be but somewhere in this last stubby wing of the corridor.

The corridor was empty. Winter didn't let her guard down as she slowly traversed the twenty yard long passage. There were doors all along the corridor. He had to be behind one of them. She just had to draw him out.

Winter inched down the long length of the corridor, until cold steel touched her bare back. "Stop right there." The guard had the sing-song cadences of a native Singaporean and from the direction of his voice, he was short. Winter estimated he was shorter than her own five foot nine inches.

She backed up half a step.

"I said stop," he repeated.

Winter wasn't going to be able to reach him that way. She turned her head enough to sight him over her shoulder. He had his gun fully extended from his body. It didn't matter. A finger was just as good a contact point for her as a chest or a face. She could reach into a body with her fingertip touching through thin cloth, like a business shirt, or the shirts the guards wore. But she had to be able to touch, at least. Contact was essential.

This one wasn't going to let her get that close.

Except sometimes talking would get them to lower their guard enough.

"I suppose you're wondering what I'm doing here," she began.

"Shut up," he snapped.

"I got lost, you see—"

"I said, shut up!" he screamed.

Crap.

Suddenly, there was a sharp sound of snapping wood, muffled. The guard grunted and sighed. Winter twisted to see what had happened.

The guard was crumpling to the polished, gleaming floor. Sebastian stood over him, a broken broom handle in his hand, the inner core of the spruce handle showing startling white in the dull night lights of the corridor. The bristled end lay on the floor next to the slowly oozing guard.

Winter jumped forward to catch the guard before he hit the linoleum too hard. "Damn it, I told you before, no violence unless necessary!" She reached for

the guard's wrist, intending to soothe him, just as she had the others. She couldn't send him to sleep until she had sent Sebastian away on a pretext.

"A gun at your back doesn't make it necessary?" Sebastian replied. His tone was at once amazed and offended.

"No, it doesn't," she snapped, stepping around the guard to face him. "Damn it, how many times do we have to do this, Sebastian? You take care of your stuff. I take care of mine. I was handling it. I don't need you to rescue me, take care of me, or watch out for me. It just trips me up and makes you dangerous. It screws up the job. Is that clear?"

His face hardened. "Clear as crystal," he said flatly. He gaze flickered past her.

Eleven months later, dozens of recalls later, Winter still could not put together in her mind a visual sequence of what Sebastian did next. Only logic supplied her with what he must have actually done.

He must have seen the guard she had failed to put to sleep stir behind her and reach for the broken off broomstick. The guard picked up the jagged, pointed end and reared up behind Winter, who was stupidly facing Sebastian. The guard aimed the sharp end of the broomstick at her back.

Sebastian grabbed Winter's shoulders and spun her out of the way, using a strength and speed she had never seen before. He moved so fast, in fact, that she couldn't follow the movement with her naked eye.

He pulled her around, out of the way of the up-thrusting spike of the broomstick, which put him in front of it.

The sharp, broken-off end punched through his ribs and into the right ventricle of his heart. Sebastian gasped, his eyes widening.

The point of the stake pushed up against the front of his ribcage and Winter could *feel* the grinding of the point against his bones.

Through his grip on her shoulders Winter measured instant shock circle through him. Shock...and something else. For the first time in the nearly two years since Sebastian had strolled into her life she went inside his body.

She ripped her way in without thought, without care. She just wanted to stop the pain.

But there was none. His body was disintegrating like that of someone long dead.

"No!" Terrified, Winter threw herself into holding him together. To fixing it. She poured herself into reversing the damage.

And it *hurt*. She screamed.

"What are you doing?" Sebastian cried, his grip tightening.

Winter grasped at him, not sure who was holding who up. Like the guard, they both sank slowly to the floor. She couldn't speak. Her focus, both mental and visual, was on the black, nameless processes inside him and bringing his body back to normal.

Her vision was clouded over, so she felt her way around Sebastian's body to where the stake protruded, gripped it and drew it out slowly, repairing tissues

and organs as it withdrew.

"Winter..." he breathed. "What *are* you?"

"Shhh..." There was such deadness in his body. Such damage. It wasn't just the stake. She fixed the damage the stake had caused, then encompassed the rest. It was like trying to hug a black cloud. It eluded her at first. There was nothing to grip. Then she simply stepped inside it and...inhaled.

The agony tore through her like burning. She thought she screamed.

"Winter, what are you doing?" Sebastian was shaking her.

"Healing you..." she whispered. Or perhaps she just mouthed the words.

She inhaled and struggled and fought. She would not give up. Not Sebastian.

And then it was done. The cloud was gone. Sebastian's heart beat normally. His systems were correct, proper, normal. Sweet and clean.

But Winter knew something was very wrong with her. There was no euphoria this time. She blinked, trying to bring her vision together and look at Sebastian.

He was staring at her. So was the guard.

She lay half-way across Sebastian's chest, her hand on his neck.

"Your eyes," Sebastian breathed.

"They're fine now," she said.

"They changed," Sebastian told her flatly.

"Bring the guard here. I need to touch him," she said urgently.

The guard started to scramble to his feet, but Sebastian snatched out his hand, grabbing the guard's ankle and dragging him back within Winter's reach. The guard kicked and struggled until Winter circled his ankle with her fingers. She sent him to sleep. It took effort to do it and made her feel sick. But he went limp and began to snore.

"Fuck..." Sebastian breathed.

Winter took a few breaths, then reached into the guard's brain and wiped his recent memories. It took the last of her dwindling reserves.

Black sickness swamped her, making her giddy. She tried to quell the nausea, but it wouldn't go away. "Something's wrong," she muttered.

"No kidding," Sebastian replied, staring at the peacefully snoring guard.

"I can't fix myself," she gasped, clutching at her head. The darkness was looming larger within her, demanding and sucking at her. Pulsing. Blooming.

Sebastian cupped her face. His gaze was steady. "What do you need, Winter? It's yours. Just name it." So strong. So dependable.

She bit back the first truthful, harmful words that bubbled to her lips. Instead she settled for the practical. "Get me home, Sebastian."

Then she surrendered to the blackness.

### Chapter Three

NATHANIAL STARED UP through the big basement windows at the noon-day sun, which at Montana latitudes, was low overhead. He had been standing that way for a full ten minutes since she had finished relating how Sebastian and she had completed the Sumitomo job.

Now he turned back to face Winter again. "You didn't take anything out of the vault," he said.

Winter blinked. Of all the startling facts she had handed over, Nathaniel chose to focus on the booty they had hauled or not hauled out of the bank?

"Why do you care what we took with us?" she asked.

"Verification," he replied. "I was told the Sumitomo job was a raging success. You just told me another version that doesn't seem to...match."

"You don't trust me. I'm wounded," she said dryly. "What do you think happened? I did Sebastian in, drained him and now live off what's left of his blood?"

Nathaniel smiled. "Your blood fever was real enough. You wouldn't limit your blood supply by killing the source. But there is a discrepancy here. You didn't take anything from the vault."

"No," Winter said flatly. "And the contract I took had a confidentiality clause, so let's drop the subject."

Nathaniel's eyes narrowed. "You didn't take anything. You *put* something in there." He smiled. "The data centre. That's why Sebastian went in. He's the computer expert. Something...a trojan or a phishing module, or even a piece of hardware sitting unobtrusively on a server, sending data to the right people. That's why the contract specified no one must suspect that a break-in happened. That's why Slavomir passed up the two million dollar pay off – because he couldn't figure out a way to do it. But you could, because you simply wiped the guards' memories."

"And Sebastian re-looped the security recordings so that nothing showed there, either," Winter added. She stood up. "I'm hungry. Do you mind if I eat?"

"Not at all. Do you mind if I follow you into your kitchen and keep talking?"

She sighed. "I suppose."

He laughed. "You will not put me aside with so simple a human habit as eating, Winter. I've been watching humans eat for hundreds of years. It doesn't bother me anymore."

"Sebastian said it did," Winter told him as she climbed the stairs to the main floor.

He followed her, his steps quieter than hers, but didn't speak until they were both in her big country kitchen with its copper pots hanging overhead and gleaming black granite counters. The wood blinds that ran the width of kitchen were all thrown open to the morning sun and the mountain view.

Nathaniel was frowning. "The facts that Sebastian has chosen to give you about me seem to be all negatives."

"Yes," Winter agreed, pulling out a Kaiser roll, ham, cheese and fixings for a hearty sandwich. She looked up when Nathaniel remind silent. "You're not going to ask why?"

His smile was sour. "I'm not a stupid man."

Winter felt a spurt of guilt spear her. She had been willing to believe everything Sebastian had warned her about Nathaniel, without waiting to see for herself if it was true. Had Sebastian manipulated her, instead of Nathaniel as Sebastian had tried to warn her Nathaniel might do?

She bit her lip, hesitating. Then she decided to err on the side of truth. Just this once. "He still loves you, you know. He would not be so bitter if he did not."

Nathaniel's clear eyed gaze was direct and unwavering. "And thus I search him out when he patently has no wish to see me. I am...concerned."

"Concerned?" Winter just stared at him.

He blew out a breath. "Worried, Winter. Does that satisfy you?"

She nodded and bit into her sandwich, suddenly ravenous.

"At least sit down while you eat," Nathaniel pleaded. "It is uncivilized, standing so."

She grinned at him. "I was lucky to eat at all when I was a teenager, let alone at a table." But she put the sandwich on a plate and carried it over to the table and sat down, anyway.

Nathaniel surprised her by sitting opposite her at the table. He threaded his fingers together again.

"You made Sebastian human again," he said.

She swallowed her mouthful, taking her time. Nathaniel just watched her.

When she could put off speaking no longer, she said carefully, "He has spoken to you at least once since Singapore. He didn't tell you that himself?"

"As you might expect, communications between Sebastian and I have been somewhat strained for the last few years. We deal with necessary subjects only and that is all. A matter like that he would not deal with on the phone. I believe he was going to tell me about it when we met this week. He hinted that there was something large he wanted to talk about." He unlinked his fingers and threaded them again. It was an impatient movement. "You remade him. You took away his vampirism. Returned him to his human state."

She put down her sandwich. "He never told me he was a vampire." Suddenly her rage was there. Huge and towering. She pushed back her chair and shot to her feet. "Two fucking years, Nathaniel! Two whole damn years and he never said a word! Not one! We were virtually joined at the hip, working jobs almost two a week at times. Through some of the tightest places, the toughest

spots, the hairiest scrapes. And he didn't say anything." She thumped her hip with her fist. "*Damn him!*"

"Some say we're already damned," Nathaniel replied coolly, sitting back in his chair. "So you're too late to send him to Hell."

She hissed impatiently. "Of course I made him human," she shot back, answering his earlier question. "I didn't know what was wrong with him! He had a bloody great stake in his heart and he was dying. So I dived in and fixed *everything*. How was I to know that the dark stuff, the dead part of him...that it was supposed to be like that? He didn't tell me!"

Nathaniel leaned forward. "And in the two years you and Sebastian worked together did you ever tell Sebastian you can control other people's biologies just by touching them, Winter? That your miracle serum is a fake? That you cover up your talent with razzamatazz and misdirection, just like a good con man does?"

Winter's anger chilled. She stared at Nathaniel. Then, with a sigh, she slid back onto her chair. "Sebastian found out in Singapore. And I told you, just now."

"So that would be 'no'." Nathaniel spread his hands flat on the table. "If you've never told a soul, not even Sebastian, why did you tell me?"

"I don't know." She frowned. "Sebastian warned me you could be like this."

A tiny line appeared between his brows. "Like what?"

She bit her lip. "Squeeze information out of people they desperately don't want to let go of."

The line between his brow deepened. "He exaggerates. I had a small natural ability to charm people that I honed over the years and apply now and again when I need to. But I haven't attempted to draw anything from you since I stepped inside that edifice of yours and found you there."

Winter gave a small, dry laugh. "Of course you haven't."

Nathaniel smiled. "I could if I wanted too, of course. Especially now I have you keyed. As a rule, though, I don't do that with people unless it's for a job."

"Right," she said flatly. She believed that like she believed in the Tooth Fairy.

Nathaniel didn't move. "You don't believe me. Sebastian will have indoctrinated you, of course. Perhaps that will work in my favor for a moment."

She stared at him. "You've lost me," she confessed. "What are you talking about?"

He studied her. "A demonstration. I will show you how I go about drawing something out of you if I was really interested in taking information from you against your will, just to prove that I am *not* working my wiles against you right now. Would that relax you and let down your guard?"

"Doesn't telling me what you're about to do work against you? If I know what you're going to do, I can see it coming and be prepared."

"It doesn't matter if you know or not," Nathaniel said indifferently. "I have you registered now. I know your vulnerabilities and weaknesses."

She shivered. "So whether I put up a fight or not, you can get past my

resistance and open me up? Jesus..." She licked her lips. "Well, your arrogance is top notch, even if you aren't."

"I've never failed a contract," Nathaniel said.

Winter swallowed. Her heart was beginning to race, so she evened it out and slowed it down, flooding her system with endorphins. She calmed, relaxed. Then she smiled at Nathaniel. "I've never lost a contract, either," she told him.

Nathaniel's smile equaled hers. "Is that a challenge?" He rose to his feet in a light, sinuous movement.

"Yes. I mean no," Winter said quickly. Her pulse jumped. "Sit down," she snapped, smoothing out her pulse again.

He sat, keep his gaze on her face. He smiled. "Your gaze keeps turning inwards. Are you using your talent on yourself, Winter? Calming yourself, perhaps?"

She drew in a long, slow breath. "None of your business."

He inclined his head. "I'll take that as a yes, then." The long fingers threaded together. "Your eyes...do you know how exactly they match Sebastian's?"

Winter couldn't keep looking at him. She found herself studying the wood grain of the tabletop.

"The same changeable green. The same astonishing light and beauty," Nathaniel continued, as if she were still looking at him. He paused. "It isn't a coincidence, is it?"

She still couldn't bring herself to look at him. It killed her to simply shake her head.

"When you healed the staking and made him human...your eyes changed then, didn't they?" Nathaniel said softly. "You took on part of him. His eyes, a need for his blood."

Winter poured calming chemicals into her system, struggling for peace. Nathaniel was stirring hard memories and panic in her. The stew of biological waste she was producing as a result was making her almost sick in reaction.

His hand curled under her arm, lifting her from the chair and Winter gasped. She had been so focused on her internal systems, she hadn't noticed Nathaniel move to her side. He tugged her gently to her feet. "Shhh..." he said as she opened her mouth to protest. "I just want to look at your eyes in the better light." He led her closer to the windows with their glowing polished wood blinds and turned her so the light fell upon her face.

At five foot nine, she was tall for a woman, but Nathaniel was much taller. He tilted her chin up so he could study her eyes and she tried not to look away.

He brought a hand up to her temple and his fingertips ran through a lock from roots to ends, all two feet of it. "Glorious red. And not from a salon. Sebastian did tell me you were a brunette. More of your talent, Winter?"

She nodded fractionally. "The black didn't...well it didn't go with my eyes anymore. And I wanted to..." She drew in a breath.

"You had changed profoundly on the inside, so you marked the change on

the outside," Nathaniel said.

She licked her lips. That was it exactly. "The old me was gone," she said.

But Nathaniel was still stroking her hair, his gaze on her face. Abruptly, she was aware of just how close he was standing to her. There was barely a hand span of space between them.

She wanted to step back, but almost like he read her mind, his other hand slid over the back of her hip, holding her there.

"I never could resist eyes like yours," Nathaniel said softly.

A ripple passed through her. It seemed to switch on all her nerves, making her body hypersensitive. "What the hell—"

He touched a finger to her lips and it stopped her protest as completely as if he had clapped a hand over her mouth. She sucked in a breath and it shuddered on the way down.

"Stop analyzing yourself, Winter," Nathaniel told her. His voice seemed to reverberate in her mind. "Stop looking inside you. Just *feel* instead, like a normal human."

She shook her head.

He leaned closer to her, his lips almost brushing her cheekbone. "You've been responding to me since you saw me. But you've been denying it. Ignoring the signals. All because Sebastian has convinced you I'm such an evil man."

"You're not a man," Winter breathed.

His lips brushed over her skin. "I am man enough I can bring a scream to your lips, sweat to your brow and have you trembling in my arms, begging for a release in a voice you will not recognize as your own. Do you doubt that, Winter?" His hand on her hip moved in a restless little movement against her ass, stroking her through her jeans.

Her heart was pounding, hard enough to echo in her temple. Under her tee-shirt, her breasts were aching for his touch, but Winter struggled to admit that.

"Sebastian was human once and now you've made him a man again. He has his weaknesses, just as we all do," Nathaniel told her. His lips hovered over her pounding temple. "I'm one of those weaknesses. He has seen me only as a negative in his life for years now. That is the picture he painted for you." His lips slipped down to her mouth, brushing over her skin in barely-there caresses, to hover over her lips in an aching-close not-quite-kiss. All Winter had to do was lift her chin the tiniest fraction of an inch and she could take the kiss for herself. She found she was holding her breath. Waiting. Hoping.

"You want me," Nathaniel said. It wasn't a question.

But Winter found herself answering anyway and replying with the truth. Her "Yes," emerged breathless from her lips to his.

His lips pressed against hers with the softest of touches. It was barely a kiss, and Winter strained for more intimate contact. He lifted his lips from her, just far enough to look into her eyes once more. "You wanted Sebastian, all the time you were together. Instead you watched him bed all those men and women and let jealousy be your bed partner. You hungered for him, didn't you, Winter? Wanted

him as you have wanted no man in your life before." His tongue stroked her upper lip. "Tell me."

"Yes," she breathed, her body trembling at his touch.

He kissed her, his tongue thrusting into her mouth, making her moan. Then he stepped away from her, his hands falling to his sides.

"Thank you," he said. "Is that enough of a demonstration, Winter?"

For a blank moment Winter's mind tottered. Then fury swept through her. "You were *conning* me?"

"You agreed to the demonstration," he reminded her. "You were warned about what I was doing. That is more than the average mark is told. And yet I still got the information I wanted." He shrugged. It was a small, elegant lift of his shoulders and seemed almost apologetic. "I did warn you," he repeated.

She closed her eyes, humiliation and cold sense at war inside her. This was what her marks felt like if ever they found out they'd been had.

"If it is of any comfort, Winter, I always hew close to the truth. There are consequences for both sides when I play a mark."

She opened her eyes to look at him. Nathaniel glanced down at the front of his trousers, drawing her gaze to the swollen erect mass there.

Winter could feel her cheeks burning, even though she was hardly a blushing virgin type.

"One of *my* weaknesses is redheads," Nathaniel added. "Especially stubborn, intelligent, independent, feisty redheads."

Her whole body seemed to tighten and pulse. Winter covered up her reaction by turning away and heading for the sink for a glass of water. But her hand was trembling, so she changed her mind and leaned against the counter, her arms crossed. It left five feet of space between them. Good.

Nathaniel stayed by the windows. "Tell me why you didn't look inside Sebastian until you had to save his life."

Winter could feel her mouth opening as her jaw dropped. She stared at him, trying to gather her thoughts. "Because I just wouldn't. That wouldn't be..." She had never had to explain this to anyone before and couldn't find the words. "Proper," she finished inadequately.

"It would be unprofessional," Nathaniel added.

"Yes," she agreed. "That, too."

Nathaniel smiled a little. "You must have given Sebastian merry hell these last two years, Winter. You're like me in many ways."

Winter could feel her mouth turn down. "I'm nothing like you. We have nothing in common."

"We have Sebastian in common," he said coolly.

"We don't *have* him," she spat. "You had him and you lost him. I never had him the way you did. He was just a business partner. And now he's not even that."

"He's something more than that now, Winter." He moved toward her. "Why do you need his blood every month or so? Why are you not working

together anymore? What happened after Singapore?"

She pushed her hand through her hair with a frustrated sigh. "I suppose, if I don't answer you in full, you'll have it out of me one way or another, right?"

Nathaniel smiled. It was a full, cheerful grin. "You're starting to learn." He cocked his head. "Although if you want to be stubborn, I'm more than happy to...coax the information out of you." He swayed towards her, his blue eyes full of sudden heat that had little to do with the teasing tone of his voice.

Winter slid along the edge of the counter, out of his way, even as her heart thudded at his nearness. "I'll cooperate," she assured him.

Nathaniel straightened up. "Ah well," he sighed. "Tell me about Singapore, then. What happened after?"

Winter sighed. "Who was the idiot that said 'The truth shall set you free'? I'd like to kill the bastard if he isn't already dead. All the truth did for Sebastian and me was slaughter everything we had. Two of the best years of my life. Gone. Just like that. Because the truth came out."

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