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Chapter One

The dark shape in the bed didn't stir. I trailed tingling fingers over silken sheets, carpet soft and luxurious beneath my feet. I inhaled crisp male cologne and sweat, and it made me drunk with excitement. The French window lay open, city lights glittering beyond, citrus summer breeze teasing the pale lace curtains. They drifted over me like a lover's sweet touch, and I burned. If I didn't have this man soon, I'd spend the night sick and sorry. And I didn't even know who he was.

Sometimes I feel so cheap.

My demon lord, Kane, calls it *rapture*. Our victims, if they live long enough, call it the sexiest thing they've ever seen, which of course is the point. It's easier to suck out someone's soul if their attention is elsewhere. Only problem is, it's the succubus equivalent of a raging hard-on, and frankly, it's humiliating to slaver like a sex-starved ghoulish over some fat chauvinist gangster or unwashed backroom drug dealer just because they were foolish enough to cross Kane and his charming minions, the Valenti crime family.

But it's my job. I'm in thrall to Kane for a thousand years. I was just glad no one could see me this time.

I crawled towards him, arousing my scent so it drifted over him like a sweet cloud. The sheet slid off his massive shoulder, baring his chest, and I bent to sniff his stubbled throat, my hair brushing his face.

He didn't stir.

The dark smell of his skin made me moan, and I slid my tongue along his warm collarbone, desperate to taste him. My breasts ached as I pressed into him, only my thin tank top separating us.

He didn't even twitch.

I dragged my fingers through his lank fair hair, and his head fell sideways, limp, no breath forcing from his slack mouth.

My racing heart missed a beat. I fumbled on the bedside table, switching on the dim lamp. His hard features lay softened in death, his tanned skin already pale.

I stared. I knew that blond ponytail, that unforgiving mouth, those rigid gym-built muscles. I'd danced with him, dined with him on amatriciana and red wine at Valentino's, peeled his big hands off my ass more than once. Nino Valenti. Gangster, standover man, multiple murderer. Ange Valenti's right hand man.

Kane had sent me to kill one of his own minions. And Nino was already dead. His glazed eyes shone vacant, colourless, their once steady blue drained. No blood, no vomit or marks on his body. It wasn't a typical mob murder. He wasn't drugged, shot, strangled, fae-poisoned. Someone had sucked out his soul. They'd beaten me to it.

What the hell?

I sat up on my knees, my chest heaving, frustrated desire radiating off me like sweet

summer heat. Dead. But still fragrant, still warm. Which meant...

My back thudded into the soft mattress, the weight of a hard male body between my legs pressing me down. Strong hands grasped my wrists, trapping them above my head, strands of my hair pulling in their grip.

"Wrong place, wrong time, sweetheart." The voice was low, breathless, a hint of exotic Hindi accent. I glimpsed dark tangled hair, a flash of golden-brown eyes, fragrant brown skin. Fresh desire burned over me, my urgent breath searing my throat, my entire body straining, yearning for sex.

Sweat trickled on my skin, running into my hair and dampening my hands. I couldn't believe this. Of all that could possibly happen to me this evening, I'd never imagined I'd end up panting with lust under Rajahni Seth.

Not that Rajah wasn't worthy of some serious panting, along with a scream and an *oh, god* or two. He was the kind of incubus who didn't need the rapture to get his victims begging for him. I'd never even spoken to him before. The words *out of my league* didn't even approximate.

The words *you killed Nino Valenti*, however, did.

"Get off me!" I kicked, wriggling, but only succeeded in pressing him tighter between my legs, my thin skirt rucking up to the tops of my thighs. He wore no shirt, and in the lamplight his taut brown skin glistened, sweat running on curving muscles.

He twisted his dark head back a little so he could see me, wet dark strands falling in his face. Sexual energy glimmered off him in waves like a heat haze, his eyes glowing with desire, his ripe lips parted and wet. His magic didn't affect me, of course. An incubus's rapture doesn't work on succubi, or vice versa for that matter. But I was worked up enough already, and likewise I couldn't imagine the smouldering need in his eyes and the deliciously hard bulge pressing into my crotch had anything to do with me.

"Jade?" His sinful lips formed my name, caressing it like a kiss. "Kane's Jade?"

He recognised me. My mouth watered. God, I hoped I had underwear on or I'd make a mess of his jeans. Then again, if I wasn't wearing any I could unzip him, squeeze myself onto him and do something about this wasted rapture that made me ache.

Of its own accord my leg wrapped itself around his thighs, straining, pleasure flowering at the pressure. "Well spotted, genius. You gonna get off me?"

His fingers tightened on my wrists, and he ground against me with a helpless little groan, but his eyes glinted with amusement as well as lust. "Are you sure you want me to? I could get off in you, if you like."

Anger boiled my desire, though the thought of him thrusting into me, exploding deep within me with his lips on mine, made me faint with longing. No way would he use me for his twisted little games, even if he was a secret fantasy fuck of mine from way back. "Give it a rest, Seth. That's a dead body, in case you hadn't noticed."

His lips hovered over mine for a heartstopping instant, but before I could slide my tongue out to taste him he rolled off me and rose, pacing, scraping tense hands through his hair.

I sat up, fury searing away my regret. "What are you playing at, using a Valenti for sustenance? Kane'll have your ass."

But I couldn't help watching as he found his shirt and slipped it on. They sure built them beautiful in seventeenth-century Lahore, or wherever the hell he was from. Dark locks tangling on his collar, sensual mouth quivering, perfect nose, strong chin, upswept

cheekbones. Legs long and muscular in soft black jeans, tight ass begging to be squeezed with both hands while he fucked me. Broad golden thrall bangles, thicker than mine, glinting tight on his forearms. He moved with raw grace, his movements swift and tense as he struggled to contain his rapture-soaked lust.

He retrieved his etched brass soultrap bottle from the carpet and dangled it in front of my eyes, wiggling it so I could see from the weight that it was full. "Kane's orders. I don't ask, I just fuck."

Which explained the state he was in. He hadn't consumed Nino's energy, but trapped it, and he'd obviously ignored soul trapping rule number one: don't let your victim come first. I'd never pictured Rajah as going both ways. Maybe he hadn't either, but Kane's word was law. I sympathised. All the same, my sex ached just thinking about a threesome.

I scrambled up from the bed, jerking my damp skirt down over my exposed thighs. "Yeah, I've heard that about you."

He gave a wicked smile and hissed like a cat, miming striking claws. "No need to be nasty. I offered." His smile turned sultry. "Sure you're not tempted?"

My heart pounded. Oh, I was tempted all right.

I struggled to keep my mind on the issues. What would Kane want with his own minion's soul? He'd get it soon enough anyway. And why had he sent both of us to do the same thing?

But Rajah's dark, spicy scent wrapped me like a sweet mist, my rapture blinding me to everything but him, his eyes, his wicked black lashes, the pulse throbbing at his throat, that slutty mouth made for pleasure...

I stepped closer. He stepped closer. He dropped the soultrap bottle with a soft thud, and ran his fingers into my hair, twisting, sliding in deeper. My breasts brushed his chest, my nipples so hard the pleasure hurt. I slid my hands over his hips to his gorgeous firm ass and pulled him against me. He was hard, pulsing, so ready, and wetness slid from me, staining my skirt, painting the insides of my thighs with hot need.

We both groaned, the air around us shimmering. Already his burning fingers sought my skirt hem, dragging it upwards. He nuzzled my throat, his lips firm and insistent, his clever tongue making me shiver. "Jade," he breathed, his voice thick with lust, "I never knew you were so damn beautiful."

Cold humiliation washed over me, spoiling his glorious caress. He'd never noticed me before. What was I thinking? He was Rajahni Seth, the hottest incubus in Melbourne, who had any woman he wanted with a single sultry glance from those bedroom eyes. And I was me.

Stick-thin, mousy-haired, tongue-tied me. Certainly not beautiful or engaging. It wasn't like we could have a relationship, not in our line of work, even if I wasn't the world's most boring woman and so far below his standards that even a glance from him was charity. So we'd have sex in a cloud of drunken rapture, it'd be magnificent, and I'd be miserable for the next six hundred years pining for him. And he'd forget about me, we'd meet in the street or a bar and smile uneasily and look away, and he'd laugh with his friends about how he was once so desperate he had to fuck me.

"This is a bad idea," I whispered, trying to push him away though my body still ached for him to give me release, my treacherous hands still wanting to explore him, pleasure him. "I don't even know you."

He stilled, his lips wet on my throat. "Are you serious? Most girls don't want to."

Now I did shove him away, my hands trembling more with fury than desire. "Am I supposed to feel sorry for you? Just get out of here before—"

Fists thudded on the apartment door. "Police, open up!"

Before anyone finds us here.

Too late.

For a few pulse-rippling seconds, Rajah's lips bruised mine, shocking, arousing, our teeth clashing in a feral kiss. "Some other time, princess," he breathed, and vanished.

I stumbled into the space where he'd been, the spicy taste of cardamom still stinging my mouth.

Jesus. He'd disappeared. I couldn't do that. How did he do that?

I cursed, and scrambled on the carpet, but his soultrap bottle was gone. He'd taken it with him. Leaving me with the cops and a dead Valenti body in a room that reeked of sex, and a most unflattering wet patch on my skirt.

#

On the rooftop, Rajahni Seth leans over, hooking his elbow into the wrought iron trimming, and watches the uniforms bundle Jade into the back of the blue and white Holden double-parked in the street below. Other drivers slow down as they pass, rubbernecking, and a gleaming silver tram rattles up the middle of the street, wires sparking, bright lights pouring from square windows advertising broadband internet.

Warm summer breeze whispers through Rajah's dark hair, drenched with the smell of thunder, tracing teasing fingers over his hot skin. A million city lights from skyscrapers and neon signs block out the stars, their reflection glowing orange in scudding stormclouds. The brass bottle burns his hand, the fresh soul energy within bubbling angrily in its new confinement, and Rajah's cock tightens even more as he thinks about what it means. One down, three to go, and Rajah will be free of Kane's thrall forever. The legend is true. He knows it. He can taste it. He senses it in the soul's mad struggles in his bottle. He feels it searing through his blood.

It was sickeningly easy to get. He'd seen the burning green aura that identified Nino as his target days ago, and he'd bided his time, contained his excitement, weighed up his chances. Nino wanted so desperately to be straight it was painful, and to have another man get his cock hard made him glow with shame and sick hatred. Once they'd made it to the apartment tonight after a few solid hours of watching Nino drink and eye him off, Rajah made the moves, and Nino's face darkened, he pulled his .45, yelled that he wasn't fucking gay, that Seth could get the fuck away from him or he'd blow his girly faggot ass to hell.

But a fragrant shimmer of rapture changed all that, dragging the poor kid kicking and cursing exactly where he wanted to go. Nino had beautiful, grabbable hair and a professionally sculpted body, even if he was a self-hating homophobe and Neanderthal dumb, and Rajah relished the thought of claiming that rock-hard far-from-virgin ass, working inside into the heat and stroking Nino into orgasm that way. But Nino couldn't wait, he'd started to come before Rajah had more than a finger inside him and then it was too late.

But it didn't matter. Rajah had figured aching balls were a small price to pay for this first special soul. Perhaps he'd head down to Unseelie Court on King Street and tease a blowjob from one of those willowy blue-haired banshees who were forever giving him

the eye, just to silence his rampant rapture.

And then Jade showed up. Slender, slate-eyed Jade, with her sexy mouth, gorgeous little breasts and narrow, perfect ass. No make-up, short plain nails, simple clothes, gently brushed dark hair falling in her face like she couldn't be bothered with it.

He's seen her before, [she's Ange Valenti's trophy girl, I'd like to keep this present tense because he's referring to an ongoing state of affairs – she still is Ange's girl – rather than relating what just happened] but she'd always dropped her gaze or scowled or pretended not to see him. Suspicious of his good looks, wary of his reputation. A woman of class like her probably thought him a slut and a pick-up artist. He'd never imagined he'd be lucky enough to have her lithe body straining beneath him, her wet little cleft hot and tempting against his bursting cock even through his jeans. Yeah baby. It made him want to fill her, stretch her, hear her scream his name.

He watches the cop car drive away down the tree-lined street towards the river and St Kilda Road, still staring after it's long gone. She didn't want him. Not really. It was just the rapture, right? No way she'd ever want a party boy.

[Sure, he gets his share of women who aren't business, men too. Most are easy airheads looking for a good time or a dark taste of danger. Not like her. I'd like to keep these ones in present too if I can, as he's no longer referring to the incident that just happened. Maybe inserting that paragraph break would help?]

I don't even know you, she said. Like she might one day want to.

He wonders what that would be like, and something diamond-cold in his heart softens.

But he can't let anything distract him, not now. He's waited centuries for this chance, and he won't throw it away because a sexy little waif gets his cock hard. Really hard. Can't walk properly hard. Maybe he'll find that banshee after all. But first, to hide this soul away where not even he can get at it, just in case.

Rajah turns away with a stretch and a sigh, his fingers tightening around the quivering soultrap. Just the rapture. Just a sweet little succubus, embarrassed by her lust.

Imagine that.

Chapter Two

"This is bullshit." I glanced at the photographs again, dragging on my cigarette. Minty smoke burned my throat, and I coughed. I don't smoke, not any more, but something about the St Kilda Road cop shop makes me nervous.

My reflection in the one-way glass along one side of the interview room showed me hunched over on the steel chair, my hair tousled, dark sweat patches staining my tight grey tank top, my flimsy white skirt smeared. My skin gleamed sickly, my lips dry, the hand holding the cigarette shaking. The circles under my eyes stood out like stage make-up, making my eyes look darker blue than they were. I'd calmed down an hour ago, but all that unrequited rapture was taking its toll. I needed energy, and I looked like a junkie denied a fix. Not a class act.

Fluorescent lights glared too bright, and the air conditioning hummed like a pissed-off insect, maddening. I shivered. It was too cold in here, and my clammy skin wore goose bumps, the stink of rapture-suppressant spray stinging my eyes.

"Look at the damn pictures, Jade." The man sitting opposite me across the aluminium table drew on his own cigarette, golden links glinting among dark hair on his heavy wrist. He flicked ash onto the floor, brushing an imaginary fleck off the sleeve of his expensive grey suit. Detective Sergeant Killian Quinn, Melbourne homicide's paranormal expert. Black shirt, no tie, sweat gleaming in brown curls, golden chains tangled around his thick throat. Pale brown eyes, blank and hard like an animal's. Cunning, handsome, madder than a cut snake.

He's also the crookedest crooked cop in town. Unfortunately, he's on DiLuca's payroll, not Valenti's, and he looks at me with the leering, sexual hatred of a man who never goes out with the same girl twice. If one thing in particular makes my nerves seethe about St Kilda Road, it's being alone in a cold white room with Quinn.

"This has nothing to do with me," I said again, shoving the pictures away, my stomach turning. I didn't know why he showed them to me, other than to weird me out. A dead fire sprite in close-up, gnarled limbs awry on some back-alley floor, his delicate crimson wings limp and trampled, dirty ice crystals in his flowing white hair. A banshee, lifeless, her lissom head thrown back, skin drained pale, blue blood trickling from the corner of her dead mouth. No one I knew... hang on. That pale green hair and sharp nose did look familiar. Maybe I'd seen her at Kane's house parties once or twice, one of those demon groupies who flirt and flutter their rainbow lashes at him, and learn too late what they're letting themselves in for.

I knew the fire sprite, too, now that I thought about it. The other night, at the pub across from Valentino's. Sylvain, Silver, something like that, one of Ange's couriers. He'd slipped golden fairy sparkle into my drink for a sly joke, and I'd spent the next few hours giggling and blowing bubbles in my champagne. Harmless enough. I didn't know why anyone would want to kill him.

There were more pictures, but unease twinged my pulse, and I didn't want to look. Detective Quinn was just poking me to see if I'd squeal. I finished the cigarette and tossed

the butt away. "You're wasting my time, Quinn. Ask me about Nino Valenti, that's what you pulled me in for. Not to look at your porn collection."

The blue-uniformed constable standing at ease by the door — presumably to make sure Quinn didn't beat the tripe out of me, or maybe to help him — hid a grin. Most other cops think Quinn's delusional, with his tales of fairy drug dealers and bloodsucking gangsters and soul-stealing succubi. Lucky for us they don't take him seriously.

Quinn leaned forward, his elbows on the table, and I smelled tobacco and metallic sweat. He offered another photo, this one of dead Nino naked on the bed. "Let's look at yours, then. Does that one get you off?" A twang of Irish accent stretched his vowels.

Second rule of soul trapping: don't tell the cops anything. If Kane wanted Nino dead, that was Kane's business. And embarrassment still flushed me when I thought about Rajahni Seth. No way was I mentioning him. "I told you, he was dead when I got there. I didn't see anyone. I didn't even touch him. What are you going to book me for, attempted fuck-up?"

"No wounds, no drugs except alcohol. Evidence of intercourse. Eyes drained of colour. Ringing any bells?" Quinn sniffed, dragged on his cigarette and blew the smoke upwards, tense. His shiny gaze flickered, his tight fingers drumming on the table's edge.

He was a speed-addicted fruitcake, but he wasn't dumb. He knew how the rapture worked. "It wasn't me. I told you. Jesus, do I look like I've had much hot action tonight?" I pointed to my wan face and peeling lips.

"Don't look like you've ever had any to me, you cold skanky whore." He said it with studied insolence, relishing it.

I didn't know why Quinn hated me. Right now I didn't care. He'd hit on me once, months ago, and I'd laughed at him. Maybe he just wasn't getting enough. "Hear that, Constable? Detective Quinn just propositioned me. Isn't that illegal?"

Quinn didn't turn around, didn't shift his hungry gaze from mine. "Leave us."

The constable shifted. "Boss, perhaps you should—"

"I said piss off." Quinn's thick fingers crunched around the cigarette pack, crumpling it. Longing and hate swirled together in his eyes. A tiny smear of blood escaped from his nose. Sweat trickled on his temple, his jaw quivering. The constable made a hasty exit, and the steel door banged shut.

Fuck.

Was it too much to hope anyone watched from behind that one-way glass? "Look, Detective, I'm sorry I can't help you. I really don't know anything—"

"Shut up." He jerked to his feet and moved swiftly behind me. I tried to turn, to follow him, but he clamped his huge hand on my shoulder and shoved me down in my seat, the metal edge digging into my back.

"Get your grubby hand off me." I tried to skid away, my heels slipping on the smooth floor.

He held on, bruising my collarbone. "You're disgusting. You and your whole weird-ass crew. How long did he stay hard for after you drank him up? Enough for you to get off?"

"You're a fucking psycho." I wriggled, but he gripped my neck with both hands, pressing his thumbs hard into my spine. A thin wire of fear pierced my guts, cold.

He leaned over me, his breath hot and wet on my shoulder, his sweet amphet sweat reeking. "How does it feel to fuck a dead man? I guess you know that already, since

you're screwing Ange Valenti too. You doing the whole family now?"

My stomach churned, and a hateful flush crept up over my skin. Humiliation shook me. I wanted another cigarette. I wanted away from Quinn, his hot breath, lustful eyes and hateful grin. Away from all men who assumed a succubus was no better than a cheap whore, men who knew nothing of thrall or rapture or the sweet slither of a demon lord's command in your blood.

I rammed the chair leg back into his shin, and he howled and let me go. I sprang up to face him, hate burning in my heart, brandishing the chair between us to ward him off. "Yeah," I invented to taunt him. "All of them. I spread my legs on the kitchen table at Valentino's and the whole lot of them do me one by one. Two or three at a time, if they feel like it. I take it everywhere."

"Dirty slut." A sickly spark kindled in his eyes, and he swallowed, his face twisted in fury. His fingers writhed, as if he longed to grab me, and a dirty dark green shell glimmered and brightened around him, translucent like an aura.

I faltered. What the hell was that?

But I didn't have space to worry about it. I plonked the chair down and leaned over it, daring him. "Hell, I'll screw anyone, the deader the better. But I'll never screw you, Killian. I won't sink that low."

Bright blood trickled onto his upper lip. He sniffed, gritting his teeth, that strange green aura writhing. He pulled his .38 from beneath his jacket and cocked it, his thumb sliding lovingly over the hammer. "That so? Maybe you should screw this, you horny bitch."

My heart stopped, cold slivers of dread piercing my veins. I imagined what he'd like to do with that gun, and backed away, my nerves screaming at me to run. I'm deathless — more or less — but I'm not indestructible. "Jesus, Quinn, don't."

The door snicked ajar, and before it opened fully Quinn hid his weapon away.

Relief flooded me like alcohol, and I detested Quinn more than ever. I turned, shaking. "I'm done with him, Constable. He never lasts long—"

Red lips, curled into a vacant smile. Hard black eyes rimmed with golden lashes, crisp choirboy hair the same metallic colour falling around a gentle jaw and soft, rounded cheekbones. A black suit with a garish blue tie, like he'd stepped in from the office.

My thrall bangles tingled, and heat prickled up my arms, sickly sweet. Inside my belly, my drug-sleepy rapture coiled contentedly, lazy like a deadly snake in the sun. Thrall always knows its own, no matter how I squirm and evade.

Kane stared at me, green sparks of amusement dancing in his hair. My heart sank, but at the same time an unfamiliar, unwelcome warmth shivered through my blood. For once, I was pleased to see him.

Quinn backed off, wiping a red smear from his nose, and the constable bundled in behind Kane with anxious eyes. "Sorry, boss, I couldn't—"

"Killian Quinn." Kane's soft voice crackled with chill, and behind him a fluorescent tube shattered, raining glass shards. "I believe I'll take this from here."

"Sure." Quinn swallowed, the strange green aura flaring. "Whatever you say. Just the job, no hard feelings, okay?"

Kane just looked at him, fingernails blackening.

Blood erupted from Quinn's nose, painting his shirtfront crimson. He choked and stumbled backwards, cursing in bloody bubbles. Uselessly he bent over, trying to stop the

flood with his hand. A dark puddle spread on the floor, fat drips plinking, and the warm coppery stink rose, fresh and tasty.

The constable blanched, darting a swift glance at Kane. "Jesus. I'll get some ice. Umm... wait here." He raced out, glad of the excuse to leave us alone.

Petty satisfaction toasted my heart, and I resisted an impulse to run up and kick Quinn in the balls while he was down. Sometimes Kane's justice is cruel, but it's always deserved.

Kane strolled up to the table and riffled through the photos. He paused at the dead fire sprite, trailing his fingertip over the limp white hair. "I like this one," he remarked, and held it out to me like a child sharing an ice cream.

I took it, and he slid his icy hand into mine and walked me out.

Chapter Three

If I were a demon lord, I'd want at least a palace, if not a castle, with a moat and a slimy rat-infested dungeon in which I could incarcerate misogynist bastards like Killian Quinn. I'd have candlelit banquet halls, ballrooms, dusty libraries full of spellbooks and lost novels by the greats. My bedroom would be festooned with a luxurious four-poster and a massive claw-foot bath, and I'd have cooks, cleaners, manicurists and masseurs, people to furnish my wardrobe from the finest boutiques.

Kane lives in a townhouse in Toorak. Alone, with a sixty-inch LCD TV, a microwave and a designer futon.

Sure, it's a nice townhouse, and Toorak is one of the ritziest suburbs in Melbourne. But Kane just doesn't get it. Maybe he's bored with immortality and having whatever he wants. Or maybe it's just that if there's ever a point, Kane will miss it.

He didn't speak the whole way home, just twisted his rings on his slender fingers and stared out the darkened car window, the occasional spark zinging from his hair. Passing headlights glared over his face and glinted in his ink-black eyes.

The driver's hulking body blocked the windscreen, fat green troll fingers gripping the wheel. I shifted around, trying to unstick the fragrant leather seat from my thighs. Exhaustion wracked my limbs, but I'd no hope of sleeping. My head ached from hunger and the rapture suppressants, and my neck still hurt where Quinn dug his apelike fingers. It didn't help that I couldn't read Kane's expression, and I didn't know if he was filthy with me or not.

The troll pulled up in front of the wrought-iron gate, and held Kane's door open with a massive green fist. I scrambled out after Kane, my skirt gluing to my legs. The night air plastered warm and thick on my skin with the imminent storm. Bats flapped in the trees out in the street, and eucalyptus stung fresh in my nose, waking me up and stinging my nerves with trepidation.

My heels clattered on the slippery slate tiles of the courtyard path, and the heavy front door swung open at Kane's approach. I followed him into the sandstone entry hall, where downlights already shone, the polished mahogany floorboards glaring in my eyes. He draped himself over the low white couch in his candlelit lounge, elegant, arranging his suit so it wouldn't crease. Flames reflected off the dark TV screen as brightly as they did from his shiny eyes.

"Sit down," he ordered softly, tiny red flames licking his fingertips.

Cold compulsion gripped my soul, and I sat opposite him in a rush, my heart constricting. He was filthy with me, all right. He's normally careful with his imperatives. A careless order can be disastrous when you're in thrall. We don't have to obey his every whim, and can even do stuff on purpose to annoy him if we dare. He can't stop us. But a direct order we can't ignore.

Kane stared at me, cocking his head to one side and then the other. "Tell me what happened at the apartment."

"Nino was already dead when I got there. Someone... someone else trapped his soul before I could. I saw him... he grabbed me, we—"

"Who was it? Tell me."

I swallowed. "Rajah. Rajahni Seth, I mean..."

Kane's eyes narrowed, a swirl of violet light disappearing into their depths, and it dawned on me. Kane had no clue what this was about.

My throat stung with indignation. Rajah lied to me. Kane hadn't made him trap Nino's soul. He'd done it for his own sneaky purposes, and dropped me in it with the cops just for fun.

Humiliation flushed me for the hundredth time that night, as I remembered pressing his body onto mine, drinking in his spicy scent, enjoying his hard cock grinding between my legs, wanting it. Bastard.

Kane's mouth twisted ruefully, ice crystals glittering on his lashes. "Rajah," he murmured, thoughtful, before returning his attention to me. "What were you doing in Nino's apartment, Jade? You cheating on Angelo behind his back?" He hugged his knees to his chest and leaned forward, eyes bright and fascinated. Kane loves infidelity and gossip, so long as he's not the one being cheated on. He reads *New Idea* and *Famous* from cover to cover every week.

"No, of course not. I was..." Confusion wrinkled my forehead. "What do you mean? You sent me there."

"Empire Tower Two, LaTrobe Street?"

"That's r— oh, shit." My heart sank. The Empire apartments were brand new, boasting identical twin towers. The cops picked me up in Empire One.

What a shitfight. I'd blundered into the wrong apartment. Which made my romantic evening out with Quinn — not to mention my almost-wild almost-night of sizzling almost-sex with Rajah — even more irritating. I shouldn't even have been there. "I'm sorry, Kane. I'll get it done, I promise—"

"No matter. Forget it. Perhaps you'd like to show me that picture?"

I'd forgotten I still held it, and I offered it to him smeared with my sweat. "This? What's this all about?"

He studied it, tracing the fairy's soft jawline. "So pretty," he murmured, smoke wisping from his fingertip. "Naughty, pretty fairy. Dead. Have you noticed a lot of dead pretties lately, Jade?"

I shrugged, glad to have the subject changed. Melbourne cafes and nightclubs were littered with fairies, banshees, spriggans and other assorted fae, if you knew where to look. The fae were into pick-me-ups and psychedelic substances. Fairy drugs were magical, reckless, darkly edgy, an experience like no other. Their shit was so fine you couldn't give away chemical drugs any more. Fairy dealers had practically run the Valenti family out of the party drug business, so naturally the Valentis put the hard word on them and now they worked for us.

Or they had, until DiLuca started seducing them away, and the whisper in Carlton was that a war was brewing, a clash of brass and blood to rival anything we'd seen in the nineties. But by nature the fae lived on the edge of chaos, and it was to be expected that one or two would turn up dead every so often. Now Kane mentioned it, I recalled we'd had to hose quite a few off the street out the back of Valentino's lately. "Not really. A few."

"Detective Quinn has. He's asking questions. I don't like Quinn's questions." The photo's surface bubbled under Kane's touch, scarlet flame flickering up to his wrist and disappearing into his sleeve. "This sweet child worked for Angelo, the fair blue banshee

in Quinn's picture too. Someone is poisoning my fae."

I frowned. "Poisoning?"

"Do you see the ice in this child's hair? Ice on a fire sprite, Jade. Not normal."

Unease twisted my stomach. If he was right it was bad news. Melbourne belonged to Kane, and the demon court usually respected territorial boundaries. Which meant the DiLuca gangsters were using their imagination. Not good. "Maybe it's just a bad batch. Too much fluoride in the water or something."

"I think not."

"You think it's DiLuca."

Kane shrugged, elegant.

I'd heard Angelo curse the DiLuca family often enough, but lately they'd thrown a whole new clove of garlic onto Ange's pizza. Salvatore DiLuca, the patriarch, had turned up drained of blood in a garbage skip — a savage business that Ange claimed he had nothing to do with, though if anyone asked me I know where I'd be pointing my finger. It took vicious strength to suck the life from such ancient stock, and whatever else Ange was, he had strong and vicious in spades. Anyway, Sal was dead, and the new guy had come out from the old world supposedly to settle things down. No one knew much about Dante DiLuca, except that he was young, powerful and passionate, which in some people's books were three perfectly good reasons not to like him already.

I realised what Kane wanted, and icy discomfort crept up my spine. "No. No way. They'll find me out in five seconds—"

"Not if you do it properly." Kane's black gaze was innocuous, but it bored into mine like a power drill, ineluctable. "News gets around. You could stage a fight with Angelo, make Dante think you're avoiding me. I must know what his game is, Jade, and you will find out for me."

And there it was. My heart sank, but already the itching need to obey tingled in my weakened muscles and churned sickly in my blood. The narrow thrall bangles stung my wrists, cold and hard. I'd have no rest until I did as he asked. Men. Always more men for whom to humiliate myself. It never ended. And my thrall to Kane had barely begun.

Warm breeze whistled from nowhere, ruffling Kane's golden hair, guttering the candles. The photo slipped forgotten from his fingers onto the floor. "Come here."

I didn't want to. I crawled over, my limbs aching with fatigue, and sat next to him, sinking into the soft white couch, close enough for him to touch me. I just wanted to curl up and pass out, but sleeping wouldn't help me. My body cried out for sustenance, the kind I couldn't get from food or alcohol or drugs.

"You look tired." Kane stroked a gentle thumb through my hair, whispering lank strands over my creased forehead. His gaze locked on mine. "My poor Jade. So hungry." ["Bangs' is one we just don't have here. How about this instead?"]

Kane isn't a subtle man, and my breath quickened, the shattering need for energy making my pulse race at his touch even as my stomach sank. I recalled the spicy taste of cardamom, the burning pleasure of Rajah's kisses, his willing body on top of mine, and my head swam with regret. If I'd just swallowed my pride and taken him, I wouldn't have to endure this.

But Kane's ageless scent of wind and thunder and midnight heat dizzied me. It isn't thrall that makes Kane smell good, but sheer power. Emerald fire kindled inside his irises, and my lips parted of their own accord, my throat dry. "It's been a long night."

"Let me help you." He cupped my cheek in his hard palm, pressing my mouth open with his thumb, leaning into me so agonisingly slowly that I whimpered. He brushed his crimson lips across mine, not icy but hot, slick and alluring, promising, and I'm not sure I'd have backed off even if I wasn't enthralled.

He tasted of charcoal, fire, ash. His mouth demanded my surrender, his smooth tongue wrapping around mine, but at the same time he gave himself freely, and his energy flowed through me at last, alien and unpleasant but also delightful.

Warmth and vigour surged into my mouth, down my throat, through my veins, penetrating my deepest insides, feeding my exhaustion, sating it. My skin relaxed and thickened, my pulse thudding stronger. My hair stretched, springing with new lustre, sparks rippling over my scalp. I felt strong, energetic, alive, my flesh tingling.

Deep satisfaction flooded me, not sexual but invigorating, and I slipped my fingers into his crisp sparking hair and held him, caressing his hot, willing lips with mine, taking as much as he'd let me have. He's a demon, after all. It's not like I can suck out his soul or anything.

At last he pulled away, licking a remnant of wetness from my lips. "Jade," he murmured, and smiled, guileless like a child. "I like it when you kiss me." He licked his bottom lip, tasting it, and for a moment it trembled, his hard black eyes softening to clear liquid grey, betraying loneliness he didn't have the words for.

Compassion pierced my heart, twisting the unease already squirming in my guts. Why shouldn't I use him? He used me. I didn't owe him anything.

But it wasn't as if he could date like an ordinary guy. Sooner or later, they all ask what you do for a living, and I knew what it was like to dread that question.

Unwelcome sympathy warmed me. Kane's not such a bad guy, really, for a demon lord, and he's a talented lover as far as the physical stuff goes. He just has no clue about the emotional side.

I don't mean that he's cruel, or means to hurt you, though he often does without meaning to because he's so strong. You just don't lose yourself in Kane. There's no substance to him, no matter the centuries he's lived or the countless lives he's known. You come quick and hard, gasping, and then a few minutes later once your legs stop shaking you wonder why you bothered. And then he asks if he pleased you, and you truly don't know what to say.

I couldn't cope with Kane tonight. Not after Quinn and Nino and Rajah. I squeezed his hand, dreading that he'd order me to stay even as I wished he had someone other than me who ever did.

He brushed a stray strand of my newly lustrous hair from my shoulder, his fingernails gleaming a hesitant magenta. "Maybe... that is, if you'd—"

"No." I angled away slightly. Guilt stung me, maddening. I didn't owe him this. "I can't."

"No." He traced his knuckles over my jaw, reluctant. "You're right. You can go now. Do you need a lift home?"

"I'll get a tram." I stood awkwardly, not wanting to seem in a rush, but I just wanted away, before I could change my mind. In the entranceway, hot breath dampened my shoulder, and I spun around, startled. But Kane remained sitting on his sofa, tranquil. I swallowed, shivering. "Kane?"

He quirked one elegant golden eyebrow, a lick of flame curling around his earlobe.

"Who was I supposed to trap tonight?"

Kane gave a wistful little smile. "Doesn't matter," he said softly. "I believe it's no longer his lucky night."

#

Invisible, Rajahni Seth watches Jade stalk by in the entranceway, inches away. Compelled, he lifts his hand to touch her shining hair, making her jump. She's even more beautiful now she's fed, her skin glowing, her eyes alive like a stormy ocean. Watching Kane kiss her, the demon's eager sensuous tongue stroking her lips, sent spasms of fury through him, but it was worth it to see her like this. Glorious.

The rampant itch attacking his skin has subsided now he's answered Kane's silent summons, but he waits, and only when the door clicks shut and Jade is gone does Rajah shed his cloak and reappear.

Burning fingers squeeze his throat, crashing him into the wall. Sandstone ridges jam into his spine, pain flaring, and hot demon breath caresses his lips, the ashy taste searing his mouth dry. "Rajahni Seth," hisses Kane, an inch from Rajah's face. Sharp fingernails sink into Rajah's throat, warm blood trickling. "Give me Nino's soul."

Kane's body is burning hot, unyielding, his fingers crushing Rajah's neck, immensely strong. Rajah's thrall bangles burn, but to no avail. Rajah can't swallow, and saliva spills from his mouth, but dark amusement makes him laugh.

"Give it to me." Kane's teeth sharpen, glinting, and he bangs Rajah's head into the stone for emphasis.

Rajah's vision doubles briefly, dizzy pain sheeting through his skull, but he grins, satisfaction bubbling black inside. "I can't," he chokes.

"What?" Shock flushes Kane's face red, and his grip loosens.

"It's in a very safe place. Safe even from me. Command all you want, it isn't happening. And soon I'll have the other three."

Kane laughs, and scarlet flames lick his hair, steam hissing. He shoves Rajah away, watching him fall. "Do you really think you can escape me?"

Rajah stumbles to his knees, choking, ashy residue still harsh on his tongue. He touches his warm bangle, where the engraving still shines clear after nearly four centuries. He doesn't need to read it to know the words: *odium, primordium, terminus, animus*.

Four words, four souls. Drink them down, the bangles will shatter and he'll be free. Free to go where he pleases, love as he chooses and not at a demon's behest. Free to live a mortal life.

For four hundred years, he's searched, and fate has finally brought him here, to the new world and Melbourne, where the streets and bridges drip with fell magical energy and dark fae auras glow bright and unfettered under fat southern stars. If freedom lurks anywhere, it's here.

He struggles up from the floor, but Kane's hand descends on his shoulder, unyielding. "No. Stay on your knees. You look good there."

Hatred radiates off Rajah's skin like sunburn, and he glares up at Kane, the floorboards hard beneath his knees. Kane traces a finger along Rajah's jaw, and Rajah has to grit his teeth to stop from snapping.

Kane laughs. "Do you like the word 'minion', Rajah? I've always preferred 'slave' myself. Tell me what you are."

Rajah bites his tongue, blood spurting, but the thrall bangles sear and itch. Compulsion swells the words to bursting in his larynx and he must speak or suffocate. "I am... your slave."

"Again." Kane's fingertips trace Rajah's lips, hot, tingling arcs of blue static crackling.

"I am your slave." Nitre stings Rajah's tongue, and he swallows it along with his humiliation, thick, black, festering.

"Yes you are. Defy me, and every grotesque agony I can dream up will become your best friend. And I assure you, when it comes to torment I have a vast imagination."

Rajah swallows again, licking stinging lips. "You can't stop me."

"No." Kane twists his fingers in Rajah's dark locks, hungry, and his voice roughens like sandpaper screeching on glass, smoke hissing between his teeth. "But I can make sure you spend the next six hundred years invisible so people won't run screaming from how hideous you are. I can make you vomit blood every time you smell a woman's juices. I can make your cock sting with the fire of a thousand scorpions every time you fuck. That's a tough call when you need to fuck to live. How would you like that?"

Rajah stares up at him, inches from rubbing his face in Kane's lap. Kane is breathless and hard, his cock straining against his pants, his fingers clenched in Rajah's hair, forcing him closer. The smell of his arousal is strong and smoky, like a bushfire, and Rajah's cock awakens in memory. He can already feel smooth naked muscle in his hands, the velvety hardness in his mouth, the hot charcoal taste of pale demon flesh pressing against his palate, the gush of seed that burns his throat like acid.

But defiance sears away any inkling of desire. "Say it," he suggests coldly. "Make me suck you off, if it'll give you a laugh. You can fuck me too if you like, since you didn't have the guts with Jade. It won't stop me leaving you."

Kane screeches in fury like a vulture, green lightning crackling between his fingertips, and his palm smacks into Rajah's cheek like a thunderclap. Blood splashes, and Rajah tumbles to the polished floor, laughing in salty scarlet bubbles.