

Adele

To call Portia Kane a waste of space was being charitable. She was negative space—a vacuum that sucked in everything around her. An entire industry had grown up to service this spoiled “celebutante.” Lives were wasted catering to her whims, feeding her ego, splashing her vapid face across the news.

And for what? She wasn't smart, wasn't talented, wasn't pretty, wasn't even interesting. Adele should know. She'd spent the last two years wallowing in the oatmeal mush that was Portia's mind. But soon she'd be free. If she dared.

Adele stabbed a ripe baby tomato. The innards squirted down the front of her shirt. The insanely expensive white shirt she'd bought just for this meeting. She grabbed a linen napkin, but only ground the pulp into a bloody smear.

A tinkling laugh rose above the murmur of the lunch crowd. Adele turned to see Portia leaning over the table, whispering to Jasmine Wills. Laughing. At Adele? No. To them, she was invisible. That was the goal—never let your prey know it's being stalked.

Paparazzi. An ugly word, with an uglier reputation. The kumpania never used it. They weren't like those curs, endlessly chasing their prey, trying to corner it, provoke it, snatching

mouthfuls of flesh where they could. Kumpania photographers were clever foxes, staying out of the fray and getting the most profitable shots through cunning, craft and clairvoyance.

A man cut through the gathering near the restaurant entrance. Was that him? They'd only spoken by phone, but she was sure it was. He had *their* look—the thinning blond hair, the unnaturally blue eyes, the arrogant tilt of the chin, the razor-sharp cut of the suit.

And he was looking right at her. Smiling at her. Coming toward her. In that moment, Adele knew how a fox felt when it saw its first grizzly.

All sensible supernaturals feared the Cabals, those corporations run by sorcerers whose idea of severance packages usually involved the removal of body parts. For clairvoyants, though, that fear rose to outright terror. By the time clairvoyants finished working for a Cabal, they'd lost the most vital body part of all—their minds.

The power of clairvoyance came with the price tag of insanity, a fate the kumpania promised to save them from . . . in return for a lifetime of servitude. They also promised to protect their clairvoyants from the Cabals, which would woo them with promises of wealth, then drain their powers, and retire them to a padded cell, drooling and raving, brought out only for horrific experiments.

And now Adele was willingly meeting with a Cabal sorcerer. Willingly offering herself to his corporation. Was she mad? She had to run, escape while she still could.

She gripped her thighs, squeezing until the pain crystallized her fear into resolve. The grizzly might be the biggest predator in the forest, but a clever fox could use that. A clever clairvoyant could use the Cabals, make her fortune and get out while she was still sane enough to enjoy it.

Adele touched her stomach. In it, she carried the ultimate bargaining chip. With it, she didn't need to flee the grizzly. She could run to it, hide behind it, *use* it to escape the kumpania and get the kind of life she deserved.

The man stopped beside her table. "Adele Morrissey?" He extended his hand. "Irving Nast. A pleasure to meet you. We have a lot to talk about."

Robyn

The world was a shitty place; no one knew that better than Robyn Peltier. Every day for the past six months, she'd scoured the news for a story that proved it. She sometimes had to check two newspapers, but never more than that.

No common murder or assault would do. What Robyn looked for were the stories that made people call over their shoulders, "Hey, hon, can you believe this?" The ones you really didn't *want* to believe because they supported a sneaking suspicion that this world was an ugly, fucked-up place where no one gave a damn about anyone else.

The experts blamed everything from video game violence to hormones in the milk to the wrath of God. People wrung their hands and moaned about what the world was coming to, as if callous disregard for human life was some new phenomenon. Bullshit. It started back when the first caveman clubbed a buddy for his wicked new spear.

But it's easier to tell yourself the world is a good, civilized place, filled with good, civilized people, because that's what you need to believe to keep going. And it works just fine until the day the ugliness seeps to the surface and sucks your life into the cesspool.

Today, Robyn found her story on page two of the L.A. Times. A man had shot a kid for walking across his lawn and thought he was perfectly justified—because, after all, it was his lawn. She clipped the article, laid it on a fresh page of her bulging scrapbook, then smoothed the plastic over it. Number one hundred and seventy.

Before she put the scrapbook back on the shelf, she flipped back to page one and read the headline, as she had one hundred and seventy times before: “Good Samaritan Gunned Down on Highway.” She touched the face in the photo, tracing his cheek, where the plastic covering was almost worn through, and she thought, for the one hundred and seventieth time, what a crappy picture it was.

There was no excuse for picking a bad photo. As a public relations consultant, Robyn knew better than anyone the importance of providing the right picture to convey your message. She thought of all the ones she could have given the press. Damon playing hoops with his nephews. Damon treating his tenth-grade class to post-exam pizza. Damon goofing around with his garage band. Damon grinning at their wedding.

Damn it, any picture of him *smiling* would have done. How hard was *that*? The man was a born performer—stick a camera in his face and he lit up. After five years together, she had hundreds of photos of him, any one of which would have shown the world what it had lost that night.

But when asked for a photo, she’d been dealing with the press, the police, the funeral arrangements, everyone clamoring for her attention when all she’d wanted to do was slam the door, fall to the floor and sob until exhaustion blessed her with sleep. She’d grabbed the first picture she could find—his somber college graduation shot—and shoved it into their hands.

Robyn's cell phone rang. "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend." Portia had set up the ring tone. Not that Portia needed her own special one. These days, if Robyn's phone rang, it was almost always Portia, who kept her busier than her dozen clients back in Philadelphia. In this business, the only job crazier than doing PR for Paris Hilton was doing PR for the girl who wanted to be the next Paris Hilton.

She put the scrapbook back on the shelf, then answered.

"Finally," Portia breathed. "It rang, like, ten times, Rob."

Three, but Robyn knew better than to correct her. "Sorry, I was in the other room."

Silence, as Portia contemplated the concept of being, even momentarily, cell phone free.

"So how was lunch with Jasmine?" Robyn asked.

She braced for the answer and prayed, if cleanup was required, it wouldn't involve posting bail this time. The tabloids called Jasmine Wills a "frenemy" of Portia's, but if there was any "friend" in the equation, Robyn had yet to see it.

The two young women hadn't spoken since Jasmine stole Brock DeBeers, the former boy-band heartthrob who really had made Portia's heart throb. Robyn had warned Portia not to accept the invitation to a makeup lunch, but Portia had only laughed, saying Robyn didn't understand the game yet, and besides, she hadn't really liked Brock *that* much. She only kept his photo in her room because she hadn't found time to redecorate.

Apparently, Jasmine had spent the entire meal regaling Portia with tales of her wild sex life with Brock. Man's inhumanity to man. Sometimes it was shooting a helpful stranger, sometimes it was beating your BFF's dignity into the ground with a crowbar.

"But I'm going to get her back. I have a plan."

Portia's singsong cracked at the edges, and Robyn bled a little for her. She wished she could write Portia off as a vacuous twit who was sucking her dry with her neediness, but she supposed it would take another hundred-and-seventy articles in her scrapbook to drain her last ounce of sympathy.

Or maybe Robyn just liked to bleed. Maybe that was why she'd taken the job. Representing Portia Kane was the lowest, most meaningless form of PR work she could imagine. But after Damon's death, she'd had enough of representing not-for-profit organizations for a pittance. No one else cared. Why should she?

"Oh, and then, just before the bill came, Penny called and guess what? They can't make it to Bane tonight because—get this—they're going to the opening of Silhouette with Jasmine. How much you want to bet Jasmine told Penny to call at lunch so she could watch my reaction?"

Every dollar I have, thought Robyn. Portia wasn't stupid. That was the problem. It'd be so much easier if Robyn *could* write her off as a vacuous twit. But then she'd show some spark of intelligence, some proof that she could do more with her life than grace club openings.

"So what about that benefit concert tonight?" Robyn asked. "If you're skipping Bane, I can call and get you back on the list—"

"Benefit concert? Oh God, Rob, kill me now. No, I'm still going to Bane, and you're coming with me."

How lonely did you need to be to invite your PR rep clubbing? "I'd love to, but I have plans. Remember that friend I was with yesterday, when you came by?"

"The Indian girl?"

"Hope is *Indo-American*."

Portia's put-upon sigh made Robyn press her fingertips into her temples. Portia never ceased to complain about Robyn correcting her gaffes, ignoring the fact Portia had asked for that "sensitivity training" herself, after she'd been quoted making a racist comment about the city's Hispanic population. Hiring Robyn had been her idea of damage control. She'd needed a new PR rep and someone mentioned Robyn, saying she was looking to relocate after her husband's death. *A real tragedy. He was trying to help a stranded motorist, but the woman saw a black guy coming at her on an empty highway and shot him.*

With that, Portia had seen the perfect way to prove she wasn't racist. Then Robyn showed up—blond haired and green eyed—and from the look on Portia's face, you'd think she'd never heard the term "interracial marriage."

Portia was still nattering on about Hope. "So bring her and make sure she looks hot—but not hotter than me."

"We already had plans, Portia."

"It's *Bane*. Now, I know she works for True News, but under absolutely no circumstances is she allowed to report on our evening. Got it?"

In other words, Portia expected full coverage on the front page.

"Hope isn't a celebrity reporter. She's their weird tales girl, so unless you're going to sprout a tail or breathe fire, she's not—"

"Okay, tell her she can report on it. An exclusive. Oh, and make sure she brings that hot boyfriend, and tell him to bring some friends. Hot friends."

"He doesn't have friends here, Portia. They aren't from L.A.—"

Portia let out an eardrum-splitting squeal. "Finally. Jasmine's coming out of the restaurant. Tim, start the car. Move forward, slowly. Rob, hold on."

“What—?”

The line went dead. Robyn was putting the phone down when it rang again.

It was Portia. “Remember how you gave me shit for wearing that micro skirt last week?

Wait until you see this.” A split second pause. “Well? What do you think?”

“Of what?”

“The photo I just sent you.”

Robyn checked her mail. There, with the caption “Wait til tabs see this!!!” was a picture of Jasmine Wills wearing what looked like a baby-doll nightgown. A *see-through* nightgown.

Gauzy pink, with a red bra-and-panty set underneath.

“Well?”

“I’m . . . speechless.”

“You’re going to send it, right? To the tabs? Oh! Send it to your girlfriend at True News.”

“She doesn’t cover—”

“Then tell her to make an exception. Oh, my God! There’s Brock! Tim, pull forward.”

Click. Portia was gone.

Hope

It took a half-dozen tries to get the key-card light to work—long enough that Hope was tempted to practice her electronic lock-picking skills. When the light finally did turn green, she was leaning against the door, handle down, and it flew open under her weight, sending her stumbling inside. She listened for Karl's laugh and when it didn't come, felt a twinge of disappointment.

She shouldn't have been surprised. She'd told him she'd probably have to work late, so she didn't expect him back. Still, her disappointment smacked of dependence. Karl wasn't the kind of guy she should count on.

Hope went to toss her purse on the bed, but threw her laptop case instead. Too much on her mind, fretting about how to help Robyn, worrying about her relationship with Karl, fighting the nagging feeling that the two weren't unrelated. The more she watched her friend spiral downhill, the more anxious she got about where she was heading with Karl.

She kicked off her pumps and squeezed the carpet between her toes, luxuriating in the feel of it, inhaling the scent of . . . flowers?

There, on the desk, was a bouquet of yellow and purple irises. Hope read the tag. From her mother, hoping her first week of work was going well. It wasn't exactly a new job--she'd been at True News for four years, and this was her second L.A. work exchange.

She hadn't planned to return. Los Angeles wasn't her kind of city, really. But the chance for a six-week stint came right as Hope had been trying to schedule vacation time to visit Robyn, and it seemed like the perfect solution.

When Hope was sixteen, her private school had been running a joint fundraiser with Robyn's public school, and they'd been assigned to the same committee. Afterward they'd stayed in touch, gradually becoming friends. Then, in Hope's senior year, when the visions and voices started, she'd had a breakdown and spent her prom night in a mental ward. Robyn had been the only friend who hadn't slipped away as if Hope's problems might be contagious.

When Hope decided to come to L.A., she'd expected Karl would take the opportunity to do a "work exchange" of his own in Europe. Instead, he'd joined her. As good as that felt, she couldn't shake the fear she was getting too used to having him join her on business trips, and that the day he didn't want to come along, she'd be devastated.

"You're home early. You should have called."

She spun as Karl stepped inside. He'd changed since meeting her for lunch, trading designer chinos and a brilliant blue polo for a dark suit that looked like it came from a department store, well below Karl's usual standards. Not that it mattered. Karl could make Goodwill castoffs look good. But the lowbrow attire was camouflage—Karl's way of blending into a crowd. The moment he stepped into the room, though, the tie and jacket were off, cast onto the chair like a hair shirt.

"Good hunting?" Hope asked.

"You forgot to lock the deadbolt and chain."

He kissed the top of her head, cushioning the rebuke. She could feel the chaos waves of worry rolling off him. When Karl settled in a new city, he couldn't relax until he'd cleared out

any other werewolves. Kill Karl Marsten, and a werewolf would instantly seal his reputation, guaranteeing for years to come that others would clear out of his way.

Hope knew that having her there made it worse. She was an easy way to get to him. So if he wanted her triple-locking the doors and taking a taxi to work until he'd finished scouting, she understood. The same way he understood the quirks and issues of a chaos half-demon girlfriend.

As he took off his shoes, she told him about Robyn's call and Portia Kane's "invitation."

"And, apparently, Portia insists I bring my 'hot boyfriend.' "

Karl snorted as he put his shoes aside. Not that he doubted Portia found him attractive. Hope knew his ego was too healthy for that. What he objected to was being called anything as common as "hot."

"Give it some thought while I grab a shower," she said. "If you want to get more scouting done instead, that's fine."

"If you're out, I'd rather stay close. I know you wanted to spend time alone with Robyn, though . . ."

"Not much use if Portia's there." Hope started unbuttoning her blouse. "In fact, it'd probably be better if you did come, keep Portia occupied, so she doesn't spend the night ordering Rob around."

"Using me as a distraction. I should be insulted."

"You aren't."

"True." He reclined on the bed, arms folded behind his head as he watched her undress.

"She was wearing a lovely diamond bracelet the other day. At least ten carats. Platinum setting . . ."

"Don't you dare."

“If I’m expected to spend my evening charming a silly little girl, I think I’m entitled to compensation.”

“Oh, you’ll get compensation.”

He plucked the hem of her skirt as she passed to the bathroom.

“It’s a big job. I think I need an advance.”

“And I need a shower.”

“The two don’t have to be mutually exclusive.”

She paused, as if thinking it over, then lunged, shirt breaking from his grasp as she sprinted for the bathroom. She got the door closed just before he thumped against it, then she quickly fastened the lock. That would slow him down . . . for about ten seconds.

She smiled and tugged off her skirt.