

# 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."