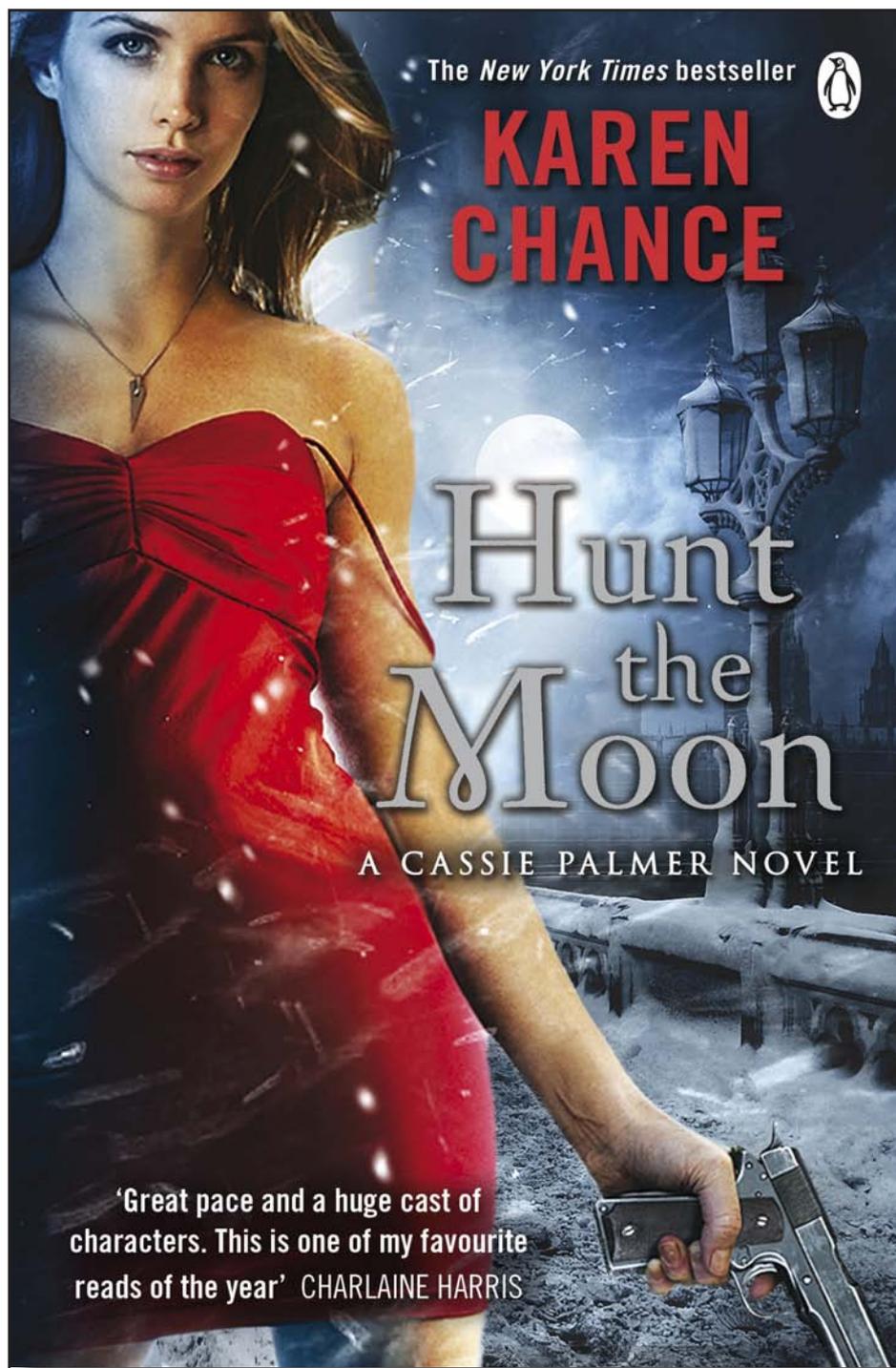


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Hunt the Moon

by

Karen Chance

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Chapter One

I hit the ground running—or stumbling or falling; it was kind of hard to tell when it felt like the earth was crumbling under my feet.

And then I realized that was because the earth was crumbling under my feet.

“Craaaaap!”

I plummeted straight over a cliff and into thin air, arms waving and feet still moving uselessly, screaming bloody murder. For a long moment, there was nothing but me and crystal blue sky and acre upon acre of sparkling, snow-covered land way the hell too far below. I knew I was supposed to be doing something, but the wind was roaring in my ears and my eyes were watering from the cold and the ground was rushing up to meet me at a pace that promised one very mushed clairvoyant in the very near future—

And then I was jerked back up, fast enough to cut off my breath, to leave me dizzy. Or maybe that was the feel of the hard arms around me or the harder body behind me. Or the stunning relief of Not dead, not dead yet—

Because that never gets old.

My name is Cassie Palmer, and I’ve cheated death more times than anyone has a right to expect. In the past two months, I’ve been shot, stabbed, beaten and blown up a few dozen times, and that doesn’t count all the magical ways I’ve almost been killed. I’d have been dead a long time ago

if not for my friends, one of whom had just jumped off the cliff after me.

I'd have been a lot more appreciative if he hadn't pushed me first.

My nose was running, I couldn't see worth shit and my brain was still frozen in abject terror. So for a moment I just hung there, gulping ice-cold air and waiting for my heart to stop trying to slam through my chest. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see a small piece of what was holding us up, and it wasn't reassuring.

It was almost transparent, except for a faint bluish tinge that was largely invisible against the brilliant sky. It had a dome-shaped top and a few filmy tentacles streaming downward to wrap around us, making it look vaguely like a jellyfish—if they were as big as a bus and had a habit of drifting around over the Colorado Rockies. What it was was almost as strange: an expression of one man's magic, formed into a parachute that I didn't trust at all.

On the other hand, I did trust the man. Although I really wished he'd caught me from the front instead of from behind. That way I could have kned him in the nuts.

"You did that on purpose!" I gasped when I was able to breathe.

"Of course."

"Of course?" I looked up, but had to crane my head back, leaving the features above me wrong-side up. The clear green eyes were the same, and, unfortunately, so was the spiky blond hair.

It didn't look any better from this angle, I decided.

"You have yet to learn to react reliably under pressure," I was told. "Until you do, you are vulnerable."

I tried swiveling my head around, because glaring at someone upside down doesn't work. But all I saw was part of a muscular shoulder in an army green sweatshirt. My sometimes friend, sometimes enemy, all the time pain in the ass John Pritkin wasn't wearing a coat.

Of course he wasn't.

It had to be subzero out here, and if it hadn't been for all the adrenaline pumping through my system, I'd have been freezing to death—but a coat wasn't macho. And if I'd learned one thing about war mages, the closest thing the supernatural community had to a police force, it was that

they were always macho. Even the women. It was kind of scary.

Sort of like dangling about a mile above a lot of very pointy mountains.

"Your abilities will do you little good if you cannot learn to function under stress," he continued calmly, as we slowly drifted closer to the pointy bits.

"Stress?" I asked, my voice cracking slightly. "Pritkin, stress is a bad hair day. Stress is gaining five pounds right before swimsuit season. This is not stress!"

"Call it what you will; the point is the same. Remember what we discussed. Assess—determine what is happening; address—decide which of your abilities can best deal with the problem at hand; and then act—quickly and decisively. You must learn to do this automatically, without freezing up, and regardless of the circumstances. Or you will suffer the consequences."

"I'm trying!" I said resentfully. It was barely two months since I'd been pushed off another cliff, and the fact that it had been a metaphorical one hadn't helped at all. I'd been declared—over my loud and sustained protests—Pythia, the chief seer of the supernatural world.

It was a job that some people were willing to kill for, as I'd discovered the hard way. For my part, I'd spent a good deal of those two months trying to give back the power that came with the office, only to find that it didn't want to leave. After a number of very hard lessons, I'd finally accepted that I was going to have to make the best of it.

As a result, I'd been working my metaphysical butt off trying to make up for the lifetime of training the other candidates had received. It would have helped if Rambo up there hadn't demanded that I learn self-defense, too. I agreed that I needed it, but one thing I didn't know how to do at a time was enough.

"Try harder," Mr. Complete Lack of Sympathy told me.

"Look," I said, trying to reason with him despite extensive experience that this rarely worked. "This isn't a great time. I have my inauguration—"

"Coronation."

"—coming up, and I'm trying to raise my abilities from pathetic to just sad before then so I don't totally embarrass myself in front of the people I'm supposed to be

leading. And then there're fittings for the dress they want me to wear, and about a ton of names to learn, and if I get a title wrong it could cause some kind of international incident—"

"I will make you a deal," he said, cutting me off.

"What kind of deal?" I asked warily. Wheeling and dealing was a vampire trait, something the other man in my life was much more likely to try. War mages ordered, threatened and bitched, depending on the circumstance. They didn't deal.

Except for today, apparently.

"We're directly over an area used by the Corps as a training ground," he told me, referring to the formal name of the war mages. "Stay ahead of me for fifteen minutes, using any abilities you like other than time shifting, and I won't bother you again for a week."

I didn't say anything for a moment. Because there were several types of shifting that came standard with my office—through space and through time. They might look the same to Pritkin, except that I moved from place to place instead of from era to era. But they weren't. His boss at the Corps, Jonas Marsden, was the one training me in my newly acquired abilities and he'd told me so himself.

So if Pritkin didn't specifically forbid me from spatially shifting, I could easily stay ahead of him—and buy myself a free week in the process. After the way things had been going lately, a little time off would be heaven. But it would be a bad mistake to sound like it.

"We've been out here half the day already," I complained. "I'm tired, I haven't eaten since breakfast and I can't feel my toes any—"

"I'll throw in a picnic."

My head came up. "What?"

"I hid a basket this morning. After the test, I'll take you to it."

"It'll be cold by now."

"I left it with a warmer," he said drily. Because war mages ate their fried chicken frozen to the ground and they liked it.

God. Fried chicken, potato salad, baked beans, maybe some apple pie or cookies for dessert—yeah. I could so use a picnic right about now.

"All right," I agreed, faster than I should have. But I really was hungry. "No time travel."

"You're sure? Because when I win—"

"If you win."

"—you'll stay until you've run the entire course. And you won't whine about it."

"I don't whine!"

"Then we have a deal?"

"I guess so," I said, trying to sound reluctant.

"Good," he told me pleasantly.

And then he let go.

A couple of hours later, I staggered into the Vegas hotel suite I currently called home and face-planted onto the sofa. There was already someone sitting there, but I didn't care. I was too tired to even open my eyelids and find out who it was.

Until someone pried one open for me with a finger the size of a hot dog. "Rough day?"

I rotated my eyeball—and, goddamnit, even that hurt—to see the leader of my bodyguards peering at me.

"No. I like being dropped from airplane height without a parachute."

Marco patted me on the ass, which I guess was fair, since I was draped over his lap. "You seem all right to me."

Marco, I reflected sourly, was getting awfully blasé where my health was concerned. He'd started out assuming that I was as squishy as most humans, and practically had a heart attack every time I got a hangnail. But after seeing me survive a few dozen attacks, he'd started to relax. These days, if I didn't come in with a gaping wound or spewing blood, I didn't get much sympathy.

"Because I managed to shift to the ground before I splattered on it!" I told him testily.

"Then what's the problem?"

I turned over so I could scowl at him. "The problem is that I just ran a marathon in freezing weather with a maniac chasing me."

"Why didn't you just"—he waved the ham-sized hand that went with his bear-sized body—"you know. Poof."

"You mean shift?"

"Yeah. Why didn't you shift?"

"I did! But Pritkin expected that, and he borrowed Jonas's necklace."

"What necklace?"

I sighed and sat up. "It's some sort of charm that allows him to recall the Pythia in times of emergency. As soon as I try to shift, wherever I am, whenever I am, it pulls me back." As Pritkin had known when he made that bet, damn him.

God, I wished I kneed him in the nuts.

Marco seemed to think that was funny, which didn't improve my mood. I got up and limped into the next room, still freezing cold and starving to death. Because Pritkin's idea of a picnic left a lot to be desired.

But my bathroom didn't. I knew it was stupid, but my bathroom made me happy. Maybe it was the size—which was huge bordering on sinful—or the soothing white and blue color scheme, or the rain forest showerhead over the Godzilla-sized tub. Or maybe it was because it was the one place in the whole damn suite where I could actually be alone.

Marco wasn't the problem. Over the last month, he'd gone from treating me like a burdensome pest to treating me like a slightly bratty younger sister, and most of the time, I found myself actually enjoying his company. But Marco was the tip of the iceberg where my bodyguards were concerned. And they'd only been growing in number since the date of the inauguration had been announced.

Everyone assumed there would be an attack. Even I assumed it. The supernatural world was at war, and killing off the opposite side's leadership was SOP. And whether I liked it or not, the Pythia was seen as one of our side's more important assets. Which explained Pritkin's stepped-up attempts to make me suck slightly less at self-defense, and the dozen or so golden-eyed master vamps constantly patrolling the suite.

They were there for my protection; I knew that. But it didn't make them any less creepy. They watched me eat. They watched me drink. They watched me watch god-damned TV. They even watched me sleep. I'd woken up more than once to find one of them just standing in the doorway of my bedroom, staring at me, like it was a perfectly normal thing to do.

If it hadn't been for my bathroom, I really might have lost it.

Too bad I couldn't sleep in there.

Marco stuck his head in the door as I was running hot water into my lovely big tub. "You need anything? 'Cause I go off duty in a couple."

"Food," I said, shrugging out of my coat.

"What kind?"

"Anything. As long as it isn't good for me."

He nodded and ducked out when I started to pull off my T-shirt. It was far too flimsy for where I'd been, but the saying on the front fit my mood perfectly: "I keep hitting escape, but I'm still here." I tossed it on a pile with the coat, my stiff-with-cold jeans and the expensive scrap of silk that had been wedged up my ass for the past half hour. Then I slowly climbed into the tub.

Oh, God.

Bliss.

It was actually a little too hot, but I figured the amount of ice clinging to me ought to even things out. I added a generous amount of bath salts, found my pillow under some towels and let my head sag back against the tub. After a few moments, my muscles began to unclench and my spine sagged in relief, and I seriously began to wonder if sleeping here was such a bad idea after all.

I think maybe I did drift off for a while. Because the next thing I knew, I was at the pink and pruney stage, the mirrors were all fogged up and the water was no longer hot. And a ghost was sitting by the tub, staring at me.

I'd have been more concerned, but this was a ghost I knew. I grabbed a towel and shot him a look; I don't know why. Billy didn't worry about his numerous vices. He'd cheated death like he'd cheated at cards in life, and he intended to keep it up. That made his morality a bit of a mixed bag, since he never intended to answer for any of it, anyway.

With an insubstantial finger, he pushed up the Stetson he'd been wearing for the past century and a half. "I've seen it before," he told me with an exaggerated leer.

"Then why are you looking?"

"'Cause I'm dead, not senile?"

I threw the sponge at him, which did no good, because it

passed right through and hit the wall. "I can't feed you yet," I said. "Not until I eat."

Billy and I had a long-standing arrangement, dating from the time I'd picked up the necklace he haunted in a junk shop at the age of seventeen. I donated the living energy it took to keep him feeling frisky, and he did little errands for me in return. At least, he did if I complained enough.

He stretched denim-covered legs out in front of him, as if on an invisible sofa. "Can't a guy drop by without you immediately assuming—" He caught my expression and gave it up. "Okay, I'll wait."

I was trying to decide between getting out and running some more hot water when there was a knock at the door. "You decent?"

I pulled the towel up a little higher. "Yes, if my wrinkled toes don't offend."

Marco's swarthy head popped around the doorjamb. "Naw, they're cute."

I wiggled them at him since I could actually feel them now.

"Anyway, grub's outside and I gotta go." He grinned at me. "Big date tonight."

"Date?" I blinked in surprise, because master vampires don't date. Not unless forced, anyway.

"Witch," he said succinctly.

"Isn't that a little . . . unusual?"

"I'm like the master. I like to walk on the wild side."

It took me a moment to realize what he meant. "I am not the wild side," I told him flatly. "I'm about as far from the wild side as it's possible to get."

He raised a bushy black eyebrow. "If you say so."

I opened my mouth, then decided I was too beat to argue. "Well, have fun."

"Oh, I will." He paused. "And just FYI, there's a bunch of new guys on tonight. Well, not new new, but new to you."

I didn't know why he was bothering to tell me. The bodyguards were changed on a regular basis. Round-the-clock security meant that some of them got stuck on the day shift, which was hard on vampires. At least I assumed that was why, after a week or two, they started looking a little peaked.

I nodded, but Marco just stood there, as if he expected some kind of answer. "Okay."

"It's just..." He hesitated. "Try not to freak them out too much, all right?"

"I freak them out?"

"You know what I mean. It's those things you do."

"What things?"

His eyes darted around the bathroom. "Talking-to-invisible-people kind of things."

"They're ghosts, Marco."

"Yeah, only most of the guys don't believe in ghosts, and they've started to think you're a bit . . . strange."

"They're vampires and they think I'm strange?"

"And no popping out of nowhere in front of a guy. That takes some getting used to. I don't think Sanchez has recovered yet."

"The only place I'm popping is to bed."

"Good plan." Marco looked satisfied. "See you on the flip side."

I rolled my eyes at the slang, which as usual for the older vamps was decades out of date, and let my head sag back against the tub. I really didn't want to move now that I was warm and relaxed and actually starting to feel my extremities again. But the smells drifting in from the next room were making my stomach growl plaintively.

I couldn't immediately identify the source, but it didn't matter. If Marco had done the ordering, it had to be good. Unlike Pritkin, Marco didn't worry about things like trans fats and cholesterol. When Marco ate, he ate big: pasta dripping in cream sauce, huge peppery steaks, mashed potatoes with gravy, and cannoli sweet enough to crack teeth. Often at the same meal.

The fact that vampires didn't technically need to eat didn't appear to worry Marco. He'd told me that one of the best things about finally reaching master status had been the return of working taste buds. And he'd spent the time since making up for all those flavorless years.

I decided that maybe I was clean enough. "Turn around," I told Billy. "I'm getting out."

He made a pouty face but he didn't argue. Maybe he was hungry, too. I wrapped the towel around myself and started to get out of the tub.

But instead my hands slid off the porcelain, my knees bent and I slipped back into the rapidly cooling water.

For a second, I just lay there, more confused than worried. Until I kept on sinking. Then I snapped out of it and began to struggle.

And found that it made absolutely no difference.

The best I could do was keep my face above the bubbles for a few seconds while I struggled to move, to cry out, to do something. But my body was as frozen as the shout trapped behind my teeth, which my lips stubbornly refused to let out. The most I managed was a muffled grunt as my head slowly went under.

Immediately, all sound vanished. The whoosh of the air-conditioning, the almost silent footsteps of the guards, the soft clink-clink of someone dropping ice cubes in a glass in the dining room, all faded into a watery roar. Silence constricted around me, a heavy, cold hand that robbed me of breath as effectively as the water over my face.

The bubbles had half dissolved by now, with pockets of suds floating here and there, like the sky on a cloudy day. In between I could see the ceiling of the bathroom, rippling with my barely discernible struggles. But they weren't enough, weren't nearly enough, and my lungs were already crying out for air.

After what felt like an hour but was probably no more than a few seconds, the scene above me was obscured by Billy's indistinct shape. He was saying something, but I couldn't hear, and then his face passed through the water and he gazed at me curiously. "Time to get out."

No shit, I thought hysterically, trying to flail limbs that suddenly felt like they belonged to someone else. A frown appeared between Billy's eyes. But it was the impatient Billy look, not the panicked Billy look. He still didn't get it.

"Seriously, Cass. Your dinner's gonna get cold."

I just stared at him, my eyes burning from the soap, willing him to understand. Nothing happened, except that a chain of bubbles slipped out from between my lips, heading for the air a few inches away. It might as well have been a few thousand, for all the good it was doing me.

My toes were floating near the surface of the water, right beside the switch that controlled the drain. It was mounted just below the faucet, within easy reach—if I'd

been able to move. As it was, I could only stare at it, stark terror creeping over my body, chilling my skin and threatening to paralyze whatever brain function I had left. I couldn't move and Billy was useless and I couldn't even take a deep breath to calm down because—

Because I was about to drown in the goddamn bathtub.

Chapter Two

The thought cut cleanly through the gibbering in my brain. People had been trying to kill me in elaborate ways for months, yet if I didn't get a grip, my epitaph was going to read: SHE DROWNED IN THE TUB. But it wasn't, it wasn't, because I was damned if I was going to go out like that.

Only it didn't look like I had a lot of choice.

The more I struggled, the more my body seemed to shut down. Trying to move was like battering against the lid of a coffin from the inside. I cried out furiously, but the shout stayed locked in my numb throat.

The worst part was the silence. Death was supposed to be loud—gunshots, explosions, screams and thunder. Not this eerie quiet that wrapped around me like a shroud. I couldn't hear anything but the water lapping at the sides of the tub, like a watch counting down the seconds I had left.

And a harsh voice echoing in my ears: Assess, Address, Act.

For a second, the words just hung there in my head, refusing to connect with anything. And then I remembered Pritkin's damn three A's. I grabbed at the thought like a lifeline, before it could skitter away into the white noise of my panic.

Okay, I thought wildly. Assess. What was the problem? That I couldn't fucking breathe.

Address. What could I do about it? Nothing. Not when

my own body refused to follow my commands, when it seemed almost like it was under someone else's—

Wait, wait. I didn't need to move physically to use my power, which was independent of my human form. And my power could—

I shifted before I finished the thought, ending up outside the tub, with my bare ass several feet above the bathroom floor. Gravity took care of that, dumping me onto the cold tile before I'd even managed to get a breath, along with about forty gallons of tepid water. In my panic, I'd shifted the entire contents of the bath, which foamed over the floor, drenching the fuzzy rug and breaking against the walls like a miniature tide.

I barely noticed. I lay on the water-slick tile, sucking harsh gulps of air into my screaming lungs, while Billy hovered around me. He looked a little panicked now, I noticed irrelevantly, right before a hand clenched around my throat.

It took me a second to realize that it was mine.

Fortunately, I have small hands, so the one trying its best to choke the life out of me wasn't having much success. It might have done a better job if it had had some help, but my other hand was locked, white-knuckled, around the standing towel rack and it wasn't letting go. I stared at it, dazed and uncomprehending, and my own wide blue eyes stared back at me from the bright chrome surface.

What the hell?

The question echoed the one in my head, but it hadn't come from me. It took me a second to realize that Billy had slipped inside my skin, the way he did when feeding. It gave him access to my power, something I'd learned to put up with but never to like. Today, I grabbed him in a metaphysical clench, almost sobbing from relief.

Help!

Help how? he demanded. What's happening?

Possession. The word stopped me, since my conscious mind hadn't connected the dots. But my unconscious seemed to be more organized, because that sounded about right. I'd had some experience with possession in recent months because it was one of the Pythia's chief weapons, but I'd never before had it turned on me.

I decided I wasn't enjoying the experience.

By what? Billy demanded.

Like I know! Just do something!

Yeah, only what I can do depends a lot on what exactly is—
Billy!

Okay, okay. Don't worry, Cass. I got this, he told me. Right before he was thrown out of me, across the bathroom and through the wall.

I watched him disappear, a look of almost comical surprise on his face, and belatedly realized who'd had control of my other hand. Because it immediately went numb and joined the choke party at my neck. But amazingly enough, that wasn't my biggest problem.

There were a limited number of things that could possess a human. Ghosts were one of them, but unless they were welcomed inside like I did for Billy, they had to fight their way through the body's defenses. And that meant a much-weakened spirit by the time it finally got in—if it did.

But that hadn't been weak. Whatever it was had exorcized Billy while maintaining its grip on me, and no mere ghost could do that. Which narrowed things down to the Oh, Shit list.

A fact that was demonstrated when the towel rack tipped over and tried to bash my head in. My hand wasn't on it anymore—no one's was—but it was going nuts, anyway. It shattered the mirror over the sink, then ricocheted off and slammed into the tub, sweeping the jar of bath salts onto the floor and turning the soggy tile fluorescent pink.

The result was enough noise to wake the dead, one of whom started hammering on the bathroom door. "Miss Palmer. Are you all right?"

I didn't know the voice, but it didn't matter. I couldn't answer, anyway. All I could think about was getting to the source. The vamps might not know any more about this than I did, but they could at least pry my damn hands off my neck.

I tried to shift, but this time, nothing happened. Maybe because the room was starting to spin and my vision was graying out and I was slowly sinking to my knees. And then Billy was back, looking pissed.

He slipped inside my skin, and immediately I felt a very familiar energy drain. You're feeding now? I asked incredulously.

I have to have energy to fight this thing, Cass! And I'm almost bottomed out.

And what do you think I am?

Billy didn't answer, and the drain didn't stop. But a moment later, my hands sprang away from my neck like they'd been burned. Suddenly, I could breathe again.

I stayed down because I didn't have the energy to get up, coughing and wheezing as my lungs struggled to drag in air through a throat that felt maybe half the right size. It was burning and my head was swimming, and I really, really wanted to throw up. But I would have cried in relief if my eyes had been under my control.

Unfortunately, they'd rolled up into their sockets and wouldn't come back down.

"Miss Palmer?" The vamp was sounding seriously unhappy now, but the door still didn't open.

Why isn't he coming in? Billy demanded angrily.

He doesn't want to upset me.

You and your damn personal space!

I didn't answer because he had a point. And because I suddenly realized that I could feel my legs again. It shouldn't have surprised me. Holding on to a body that isn't yours and doesn't want to be held is no easy task. And it looked like whatever had its claws in me couldn't keep all my appendages in thrall at once while also fighting off Billy Joe.

It wasn't much of an advantage, but it was the only one I had. I staggered to my feet, wincing when a piece of broken glass cut my heel, and almost tripping over the soggy, bunched-up rug. I was trying hard not to panic, but it felt a lot like drowning again—being naked and blind and at the mercy of an enemy I knew nothing about.

Except that it wanted me dead.

And it wasn't too particular about how I got that way.

I hadn't taken two hesitant steps when my legs suddenly went numb, my body turned and I ran—straight into the nearest wall. My head happened to be twisted slightly, which saved my nose, but my temple hit hard enough to leave me reeling. I staggered back, but only to get enough leverage to ram the wall again.

Eyes! I screamed mentally as I jerked out a hand to break my fall and almost broke the bone instead.

Working on it.

Work harder! I cried as the impact sent me stumbling into the side of the sink.

My hip hit the unforgiving marble hard enough to bruise, but a moment later, my eyesight returned. That would have been a relief, except that it freed up my attacker to grab back one of my hands. Luckily, it was the bad one, and it dropped the hair pick it had snatched up before it could stab me in the eye with it.

The pick went down and my other hand came up—along with a jagged piece of the mirror that it used to slash at my jugular. Billy caught it just in time, but the hand didn't drop. It hovered menacingly in the air in front of my face, shaking from the effort, while three different spirits battled for control.

I couldn't tell who was winning, but I didn't think it was us. I stared at the wickedly sharp triangle as it slowly edged closer, reflecting back to me wildly matted blond hair, a bone white face and dazed blue eyes—and the door to the dining room over my left shoulder. It was nearer now, and I was still on my feet.

I ran for it.

Halfway there, my body went into spasms and I went down. But I managed to snag a potted fern on the way. The pretty piece of blue and white delftware was on a pretty little stand, which made a pretty little crash when it tipped over and exploded against the hard tile.

And, finally, that was enough for the guards. The door burst open and three vamps rushed in, stopping in confusion when they saw nothing but a skinny white girl ripping the bathroom apart. And then it felt like something was ripping me, too, a burning, tearing sensation that mercifully only lasted a second before something shot out of me.

A wordless scream knifed through the silence, and something shivered through the air of the bathroom. The presence was oily and slick and wrong, but the smell was worse: sickly sweet, thick at the back of my throat, cloying, instantly nauseating. It sparked a feeling of primal revulsion deep in my gut, and it didn't look like I was the only one. The vamps ducked and pulled guns, despite the fact that there was nothing for them to shoot—except for me,

and they managed not to do that even when I suddenly dove through the middle of them.

I wasn't driving, but I didn't think the entity was, either, because I could feel every inch of hide getting burnt off as I hit the carpet in the dining area face-first. Not helping! I told Billy, just as the remnants of the mirror shot by overhead and embedded themselves in the remaining guards.

I didn't have time to apologize, because the apartment was going nuts. A decanter set flew up from a nearby cart and slammed into the wall behind me in a wash of booze and expensive glass. The cutlery on the room service cart followed and would have skewered me if a vamp hadn't thrown himself in the way. And then the light fixture over the dining table ripped out of the ceiling, whirling for me like a crystal tornado.

Billy flung us into the living room and behind the sofa, which didn't help, and then rolled us under the coffee table, which did. At least for the moment. All I could see through the glass top were a few hundred crystals beating against it like an expensive hailstorm, but the view through the side was less obstructed.

I stared around, as much in disbelief as panic, because I'd never seen anything like it. Ghosts find it very difficult to move even tiny things, like a paperclip or a piece of paper. They don't rip curtain rods off the walls or toss heavy paintings at people's heads or throw chairs through plate-glass windows.

Except for bleeding walls, it looked like something out of *The Amityville Horror*.

I blinked, finally making the connection. And then I squeezed Billy so hard he yelped. Cut it out!

We have to get to Pritkin, I told him quickly.

What? Why? What can he—

This isn't a ghost.

No shit!

So it's probably some kind of demon.

So?

So he'll know how to drive it out!

Billy didn't say anything, maybe because Pritkin was our resident demon expert. Or maybe because the coffee table had just splintered down the middle. He flipped us onto all

fours and we scrambled out the other side, just as the chandelier burst like a crystal grenade all over the living room.

It might not have been made for this type of activity, but the dozen or so thick columns of wood flying around looked sturdier. They also looked familiar. I finally recognized one when it slammed through the piano while trying to get at me. I stared at one of the legs off the dining set and wondered why the entity would bother trashing that. We were on the other side of the apartment now, so it didn't seem to make a lot of sense.

Until I saw one of the guards run past, being pursued by the equivalent of a flying stake. He dodged it—mostly—and it hit his leg instead of his heart. That was lucky, because it punched through flesh and bone as easily as the other pieces did the walls, the furniture and the flimsy sides of the piano.

The vampires who formed my bodyguard were all senior-level masters and, presumably, they'd seen a lot of crazy stuff through the years. But it didn't look like they'd seen this. Vamps who prided themselves on strength and impassivity were running around wild-eyed, attacking the misbehaving furniture as if they thought it was the problem, or just trying to avoid being vamp shish kebab.

But other than for the sound of the suite imploding, it was weirdly quiet. I couldn't talk and the vamps didn't need to—at least not aloud. They could communicate mentally with each other as easily as I talked to Billy, something that usually gave them a hell of an advantage in a fight. Except, apparently, for right now.

But at least one guy had decided that they needed outside help, because he'd whipped out a cell phone. He was on the other side of the room from where I was hunkered down behind the baby grand, and I didn't have control of my vocal chords, anyway. So I poked the guy who did. Tell him to call Pritkin!

And Billy tried. But between my burning throat and the mortal peril and the deafening noise, nobody paid any attention. These guys are new—I don't even think they know who he is! Billy said frantically.

Then you'll have to go get him.

How? We'll never make it to the door through all that!

I won't, but you will. It isn't after you.

Yeah, except if I leave, that thing'll have its claws back in you!

And if you don't, it'll beat me to death! I wasn't seeing a whole lot of difference, really.

Okay, okay. Billy sounded like he was trying to calm down and wasn't doing so great. Say I find the mage. Then what? He can't see me.

Shit. Billy was so solid to me that I had a problem remembering that that wasn't true for everyone. But Pritkin wouldn't even know he was there.

It was hard to concentrate over the sound of the piano's death throes, but I tried. Only the three A's weren't doing me a lot of good right now. I knew what the problem was: I needed to get to Pritkin. But I didn't have any abilities to help me do that.

If I could have shifted, it would have been easy. But his room was five stories down and on the other side of the hotel. And I knew without trying that I couldn't make it that far. It was hard to shift after Billy had fed, even when I wasn't already exhausted. As it was, I'd be lucky to get five yards, and that wouldn't—

I stopped, my thoughts reversing. Get to Pritkin, I told Billy over the sound of the blood pounding in my temples.

I just told you, that won't—

Listen to me! He has Jonas's necklace. He used it to pull me back to him today when I tried to shift. You've got to get it!

And then what? It works on you only when you use your power, and you can't—

I only need to shift—it doesn't matter how far! A couple of inches should be enough to activate it. Now go!

For once, he didn't argue, maybe because he didn't know what else to do. I felt him leave, and braced myself for another onslaught. But the entity was having too much fun to notice Billy slipping away, and I didn't give it time to figure things out. I grabbed the top of the piano bench for a shield and started crawling.

A guard was on top of a tipped-over chair, batting at the flying shards of wood with a bloody table leg like a slugger at a baseball game. He saw me and his eyes went round, as if he assumed I must have been skewered ages ago. "Not dead yet," I croaked encouragingly, and crawled on.

The dining room had been destroyed, but the room service cart had miraculously survived, wedged in the doorway between the bar and the kitchen. I pushed it the rest of the way inside and peeked under the warming lid. Fried chicken, and it was still hot.

There was a God.

I hunkered down behind the kitchen table and concentrated on regaining enough strength to shift on my own if Billy failed. That basically involved stuffing down as much as possible as fast as possible without throwing up. I was making a serious dent in Marco's vast quantities when something caused me to look up.

Three vamps stood in the kitchen doorway, staring at me. They looked a little shell-shocked, and a glance at the stainless side of the fridge told me why. I was naked and bloody, with tufts of half-dried hair sticking up everywhere and a chicken leg distorting one side of my mouth. I looked startlingly like a mad cavewoman.

I removed the leg and licked my greasy lips. "Um. Hi?"

They didn't say anything. For a moment, we all just looked at one another. And then the creature attacked again, and I stopped worrying about the impression I was making and started worrying about getting my brains bashed out against the side of the table. I saw stars and red exploding things that probably came under the category of Not Healthy.

And then I saw Pritkin staring at me in utter shock.

I didn't remember trying to shift, but I must have, because instead of cold kitchen tile, my toes were suddenly sinking into the carpet in his hotel room. I'd landed by the bed, which he'd been in the process of turning back. His hair was damp and curling around his neck, and a few drops of water still clung to his shoulders. And either he hadn't bothered to put on pajamas yet or he slept in the nude, which might have been awkward if I hadn't been in the process of dying.

"Possession," I croaked, before my hands formed themselves into claws and my body launched itself off the floor, going straight for those clear green eyes.

I didn't succeed in scratching them out—Pritkin's reflexes are better than that, even when totally gobsmacked—

but I did tear an inch-long gash down one of his cheeks. "Sorry!"

"What kind of possession?" he asked grimly, one hand locked around each of my wrists.

"Not ghost, but I don't—"

I stopped talking, because my throat had closed up and my body started thrashing against his hold. Pritkin looked startled for a moment, like I was harder to control than he'd expected. But the next second, I found myself on my back on the bed with my hands pinned over my head by one of his. He used his other to summon a stream of little vials from a bookshelf he'd installed, apparently as a sort of filing system for nasty potions.

Most of which were soon all over me.

Some were sticky and some were sludgy and all of them were really, really vile. I wouldn't have cared if they'd done anything. But as far as I could tell, the most they accomplished was to stain my skin in blotches without affecting the thing inside me at all.

And then my entire body suddenly went numb and I had maybe a second to think—oh, shit—before the entity used my legs to send Pritkin sailing across the room. I saw him hit and pass through the wall, in an odd mirror of what Billy had done. Only Pritkin's much more material body took the flimsy Sheetrock and hard studs along with him.

And, to my surprise, the creature decided to follow. Maybe it assumed that I wouldn't be much of a challenge if it killed him first, or maybe he'd managed to piss it off. I didn't know, but I felt when it started to pull away, when all of the sensations of a seriously overtaxed body came rushing back at once, forcing out a whimper that I promised myself to deny if I survived long enough.

And then I felt its shock as I slammed my shields shut, trapping it inside.

I hadn't been able to expel the thing, but this was a different story. It had managed to possess me in the first place because I'd been exhausted and careless and I'd been expecting Billy any moment, so my shields were down. But they weren't now, and this was my body and ownership bestowed some privileges. And I was damned if I was going to let that thing finish off the one guy who had a chance

of getting me out of this while he was possibly unconscious and—

And it had figured out that my body had become its prison and it really wanted out.

We apparently didn't speak the same language, but it didn't matter, because it started showing me a cascade of images like something out of a horror movie: my heart exploding in my chest, my lungs shredding like tissue paper, my brain—

If you could do all that, you already would have, I thought back viciously, sending the image of it trying to stab me in the eye with a freaking hair pick. I didn't know why it could trash the apartment and not me, but every single attack had been external or passive, like holding me underwater while I drowned. It was starting to look like maybe it wasn't all that strong inside the body.

Or like it wasn't so used to this possession thing, either.

That didn't make sense for a demon who, presumably, did this all the time, but I didn't have a chance to figure it out before it started thrashing around inside me. And if I thought I'd been in pain before, it was nothing compared to this. It was determined that I was going to let go, and I was determined I wasn't, because if it killed Pritkin I was dead, anyway.

And then he was back, bloody and bruised and reaching through the hole to grab something from his footlocker that he tossed at me. "Cassie, catch!"

My arm shot up automatically and I felt my fist close around something cold and hard. And then I didn't feel anything else for a long moment as I levitated completely off the bed.

Definitely Amityville, I thought blankly, and let go of my shields. My body gave a huge convulsion, and I was immediately surrounded by a storm of dark, flapping wings, a noxious odor and an infuriated, screeching cry.

And then I hit the bed and rolled off the side. That was lucky, because a second later what felt like a miniature cyclone burst out through the window and a shower of glass exploded into the room, in flagrant disregard for the laws of physics. But most of it didn't hit me, since I was huddled on the floor with my hands over my head, trying not to scream.

Pritkin had crawled back through the wall at some point, because when I looked up, he was crouched on the floor, staring at me. I stared mutely back, panting and limp, every limb shaking in reaction as confetti of dust and tattered bits of wallpaper rained down all around us. And then the door slammed open and Marco charged in.

He took in my naked, multicolored self, the hole in the wall, the broken window and the battered, bleeding war mage. "The fuck?" he said distinctly.

I swallowed, licking lips that tasted like dust and copper. "I think I freaked out the staff," I told him weakly. And then I fainted.



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