



## Hunt the Moon: A Cassie Palmer Novel

By Karen Chance

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But someone doesn't want Cassie to become Pythia, and is willing to go to any lengths to make sure the coronation ceremony never happens- including attacking her mother before Cassie is even born.

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## **Hunt the Moon: A Cassie Palmer Novel By Karen Chance Bibliography**

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

A wonderfully entertaining romp with an engaging heroine -- Kelley Armstrong A proven winner Romantic Times Book Review The urban fantasy equivalent of a summer blockbuster SF Site

#### About the Author

Karen Chance grew up in Orlando, Florida, the home of make-believe. She has since resided in France, Great Britain, Hong Kong, and New Orleans, occasionally teaching history. She is the bestselling author of the Cassandra Palmer series and the Dorina Basarab series, and she has contributed stories to the anthologies *On the Prowl* and *The Mammoth Book of Vampire Romance*. Karen is currently living in Tampa, where she continues to write. Actress Cynthia Holloway, a native of Seattle, Washington, has performed on stage, film, and television, as well as doing voice-over work. She has lent her voice to television programs, radio and television commercials, video games, and audiobooks. Cynthia's most recognizable work is as the voice of Anita Blake in Laurell K. Hamilton's bestselling vampire hunter series.

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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.

“*Craaaap!*”

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 mashed 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 possibly the abject, 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 to. 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 kneed 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 the power 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 also 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 knew 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. I even 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 goddamned 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.

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