



Tempt the Stars (Cassie Palmer)

By Karen Chance

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Yeah, that part sucks.

But that's just the tip of the iceberg for Cassandra Palmer, aka the Pythia, the freshly minted chief seer of the supernatural world. After all, Cassie still has to save a friend from a fate worse than death, deal with an increasingly possessive master vampire, and prevent a party of her own acolytes from unleashing a storm of fury upon the world. Totally just your average day at the office, right?

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Editorial Review

Review

“Karen Chance will enthrall you.”—*USA Today* bestselling author Rebecca York

“Chance is a genius.”—*Ink and Paper*

Praise for the Cassie Palmer Novels

“Ms. Chance is a master....A series well worth getting hooked on.”—*Fresh Fiction*

“Karen Chance takes her place along[side]...Laurell K. Hamilton, Charlaine Harris, MaryJanice Davidson, and J. D. Robb.”—*SF Revu*

About the Author

Karen Chance has lived in France, the United Kingdom, and Hong Kong, but always comes back to America. She currently lives in central Florida, the home of make-believe, which may explain a lot.

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“You gots big.”

The small voice came from the even smaller girl in the doorway. She was hard to see, shimmering in the night like the moonbeams falling through her, and overwritten by the hazy, graffiti snarl of ghost trails weaving through the air. I felt some of the muscles in my neck unclench.

And then tense back up when a too-loud voice called from a nearby room, “Cassie?”

I refrained from jumping—just. Abrupt movements might scare her, and I couldn’t afford that now. “Be right there,” I said softly, smiling reassuringly at the ghost girl.

“What?” the voice asked, louder this time.

I looked behind me to see the wild white head of my partner in crime, Jonas Marsden, poking out of an office door. With the crazy hair and the pink cheeks and the Coke bottle glasses, he looked like Einstein on acid. But, despite appearances, he deserved his position as the de facto leader of the magical world. Jonas headed up the powerful Silver Circle, the largest organization of magic workers on earth.

But great mages are still human, and Jonas’ ego wasn’t taking the aging thing well. Like when he refused to put a hearing spell on himself because the rest of us just talked too lowly. Unfortunately, the same couldn’t be said for him.

“There’s no need to whisper,” he bellowed. “I assure you, the shield will hold.”

“So you keep telling me.” He was talking about the sound-deadening spell he’d cast to keep any noise we made from filtering out into the rest of the house. That was kind of important, since we were hovering on train-wreck territory here. Of course, that pretty much described my life lately.

My name is Cassie Palmer, and I’m the newly crowned Pythia, aka the world’s chief seer. That sounds a lot

more impressive than it is, since so far it's mostly involved giving taxi rides through time to strange people, in between almost getting killed. As I was currently a couple of decades back, trying to rob my old vampire master along with a guy who made eccentric look boring, today was pretty average.

But my nerves didn't think so.

Maybe that's why the spotted mirror over the fireplace showed me short blond curls that looked like I'd been running nervous fingers through them, a face pale enough to make my freckles stand out starkly, and wide, startled blue eyes. And a T-shirt that proclaimed Good girls just never get caught.

Let's hope so, I thought fervently.

Fortunately, as vampire courts went, this one was pretty lax, being run by a guy who had been the Renaissance equivalent of white trash. But Tony had one hard-and-fast rule: nobody missed dinner. I wasn't sure why, because vampires don't need to eat—food, anyway. And most don't, since any below master level, the gold standard for vamps, have nonworking taste buds.

Maybe it was tradition, something he'd done in life and still clung to in death. Or maybe he was being his usual asinine self and just wanted to enjoy his dinner in front of a bunch of people who mostly couldn't. Either way, it meant that Jonas and I should have an hour before anybody interrupted us.

Assuming the spell held, anyway.

Jonas didn't look too worried. "You could dance an Irish jig in here," he boasted, "in clogs, and no one would hear."

"No, but they might feel the reverberations—"

"In this?" He gestured around at the creaks of Revolution-era floorboards, the lash of rain against centuries-old windows, and the intermittent lightning that cracked the sky outside, sending shadows leaping across original plaster walls. Tony lived in a historic farmhouse in the Pennsylvania countryside, which was usually picture-postcard pretty.

This wasn't one of those times.

"Or scent us," I added.

"From across the house?" Jonas scoffed. "They're not superhuman."

I blinked. "Well, actually—"

"You give your vampires too much credit, Cassie," he told me severely. "In a contest between them and a good mage, always bet on the mage!"

Well, that's what I'm doing, I was going to point out. But I didn't because I wanted him to shut up already. I'm not usually twitchy, but then, I don't usually try to burglarize the booby-trapped office of a vampire mob boss, either. Not that I was doing that now. That was Jonas' thing. I was here for something else.

"Okay," I said, glancing nervously back at the girl.

Mercifully, she was still there, even a bit more substantial now. The old doll she dragged around by the hair had taken on a pinkish hue, and her dress, part of which disappeared through the floor, was now a pale shade

of blue. I let out a breath I hadn't known I'd been holding.

The ghost's name was Laura and we'd played together as kids, back when I called this place home. Only I'd grown up and she . . . well, she never would.

It's one of the hard facts about ghosts: when you die, you pretty much stay the same way you were in life. Meaning if you're a one-armed man, you're going to be a one-armed ghost; it's just the way the energy manifests. Mostly, they learn to roll with it Beetlejuice style, throwing severed heads at unsuspecting tourists—the ghostly term for cemetery visitors—or trailing disemboweled intestines after them like a gory train.

Humor tends to take on a macabre bent after death.

But the downside is that, if you die at five years old, you stay five. You might learn new things, acquire new skills, even gain wisdom of a sort. But it's a kid's wisdom. You don't suddenly start thinking like an adult.

Even after more than a hundred years you don't.

That was a problem, since I needed information, and I needed it badly. Specifically, I needed to talk to my mother, who had once been Tony's guest, too. But who had died when I was younger than Laura appeared now.

Of course, visiting a dead woman should be easy enough for a time traveler, right? Only I never get easy. I'd spent the better part of a week looking for her, and come up with zilch. But I had to find her; a friend was in trouble and Mom was the only one who might know how to help him. And there was a damned good chance that Laura knew where she was.

But if I remembered right, getting her cooperation was likely to be tricky.

"Hey, Laura—" I began casually.

"What's he doing?" she asked, dragging her dolly over into the wedge of light coming out of the office.

"Nothing. It's fine," I whispered, trying to keep her out here, where we could talk in private.

So, of course, she went right on in.

I closed my eyes.

I've been able to talk to ghosts for as long as I can remember, far longer than I've been doing my current crazy job. But it's like with people—they talk to you only when they want to. Of course, they usually want to, since most ghosts are confined to a single place and don't get many visitors. Well, many who notice them, anyway. So if Jonas hadn't been here, I'd probably have been getting my ear chewed off.

But he was, and of the two of us, he was clearly the more interesting.

I accepted the inevitable and followed her inside.

Jonas must have done some dismantling, because nothing shot, stabbed, or grabbed me as I passed through the door. He looked pretty okay, too, if you ignored his habit of picking up random things and sticking them in the billowing mass he called hair. Or, in this case, on.

“He looks like Honeybun.” Laura giggled. She was talking about my childhood pet rabbit, the one we’d basically shared since animals can sense ghosts a lot better than people can.

And she wasn’t wrong.

“Did you find something?” Jonas asked, looking up from sorting through the mess on the desk. And sporting two outrageous tufts of white hair escaping from either side of an old fedora. It didn’t match his outfit, and he hadn’t had it on when we arrived. But I’d already discovered that trying to figure out Jonas only made my head hurt, so I mostly didn’t.

“He’s just fluffy.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Uh, no. Not yet,” I told him, trying to surreptitiously shoo Laura back out the door.

She crawled under the desk instead.

“Done already?” Jonas asked, looking at me over the tops of his glasses as I crawled after her.

“Uh, yeah.”

“Are you certain you didn’t overlook anything? It’s quite small, you know.”

“Pretty sure.”

What he wanted wasn’t in the outer office. I knew that because I knew where it was, but I needed him to take a few minutes to find it. Minutes that I could use to pry some secrets out of Laura. But Jonas wasn’t looking like he felt like giving them to me. For once, Jonas was looking focused.

“This is no time for games, Cassie,” he said sternly, as Laura crawled through his legs.

“Couldn’t agree more,” I muttered, grabbing for her.

Only to have her go abruptly less substantial, and my hands to pass right on through. And grab Jonas’ calf instead. “Is there a problem?” he asked dryly.

Yes, although the fading wasn’t it. Laura’s senses didn’t work as well when she wasn’t all there, so to speak, and she was curious enough to be back any second. The problem was worse than that.

The problem was that she thought I wanted to play.

“No, no, wait—oh, shit,” I hissed as she blinked completely out of sight.

“What?” Jonas tensed, staring around. “What is it?”

Laura giggled and reappeared over by the threadbare plaid sofa, where Tony parked his guests so he could watch them squirm on the tough old springs. “Can’t catch me!” she said, throwing out the usual challenge.

It had been fun when I was a child and didn’t have anything better to do. It was less so now. “No, listen—”

“I am listening,” Jonas said impatiently, as she disappeared again.

Damn it!

I crawled out from under the desk. “Cassie, what—”

“I’ll be back in a second,” I told him, through gritted teeth.

“Even for a Pythia, you’re acting a bit crazed,” he said mildly as I stomped out.

Not half as crazed as I was going to be if I didn’t find a certain playful ghost, I thought grimly, staring around the outer room.

Nothing stared back, except for an old portrait on the wall, some glowering relative of the family that used to own this place before Tony decided he wanted it. It was limned with moonlight, like everything else in here, which was a problem. When faded, ghosts were little more than silver smudges, and damned hard to spot in a chiaroscuro of old furniture, stuffy portraits, and leaping shadows. Lightning flashed outside, making the whites of the painted eyes stand out creepily.

“No fair hiding,” I called tensely.

But it looked like I was the only one who thought so.

This really wasn’t going to be easy. And what else was new? I thought savagely. If there was one thing I’d learned in the last three months, it was that nothing ever was. It was like living in Murphy’s Law.

Only no.

That would be a step up.

According to Murphy, if something can go wrong, it will. But that wouldn’t work for my life. I needed a new rule. Cassie’s rule. Something along the lines of “if something can’t go wrong, because it is completely impossible for it to happen in the first place, it will somehow manage to go wrong anyway.”

Case in point: most people would agree that having one’s father killed by a vampire mob boss was kind of unlikely. And that having the soul of said father end up trapped in an enchanted paperweight, because the vampire was an asshole who wanted to gloat over his former servant for as long as possible, was just plain silly. Add in the fact that the fate of the world might now hinge on that paperweight and the spirit it held and the whole thing edged into the ludicrous. And if the magical community managed to lose said all-important paperweight, because said bastard of a vampire ran off to Faerie with it . . . well. I don’t even know if they have a word for that.

But they need one. Because it happened anyway. Just like that, to me.

See the kind of thing I’m dealing with here?

But right now retrieving the paperweight of doom was Jonas’ problem. He was the one trying to save a world. I wasn’t that ambitious. I was just trying to save a friend.

And it wasn’t going so great.

I gave up on subtlety and pulled the world’s ugliest necklace out of my T-shirt.

A second later, a ghost appeared, like a genie from a bottle. Only this genie was wearing cowboy chic and

looking pretty spooked. “No,” he told me flatly. “No way, no how. Don’t even think about—”

“I don’t have a lot of time here,” I whispered harshly. “And she can do this for hours. We had a game that lasted a whole week once.”

“And that’s my problem how?” he asked, glancing around nervously. “Damn, it’s worse than I remembered. This whole place is dripping with ectoplasm.”

“You know there’s no such thing,” I said impatiently. The ghost’s name was Billy Joe, and despite being among the life-challenged himself, he didn’t know crap about death. Maybe because he spent eternity watching cheesy old movies and driving me crazy.

We’d met when I was seventeen, and accidentally bought the necklace he haunted as a birthday gift for my governess. She’d ended up with some unhaunted hankies instead, and I got a nineteenth-century Irish gambler with a big mouth and a yellow streak. Some days, I still think she came out ahead.

“Oh, really?” Billy asked, his usual sarcasm overwritten by a tinge of panic. “Stop looking around like a human and check out Ghost Vision for a change!”

His tone gave it capitals when it was really just the way seers look at the world. Some people are double-jointed; we’re double-sighted, with that second set of eyes, the kind that focuses on the spirit world. I usually tried to tamp it down, since watching others tends to make it more likely that they’re going to watch you back, and there’s some scary stuff out there. But it didn’t look like I was going to be finding Laura any other way.

“See what I mean?” Billy demanded, when I switched over. Only now, instead of a semitransparent cowboy in a ruffled shirt and a Stetson, he was a shining green column of vaguely cowboy-shaped smoke. And less distinct, instead of more as should have been the case, because he’d been right—the whole room glowed with the same eerie color.

It wasn’t just that the farmhouse’s previous owners had met a messy end. This place had started out as an Indian burial mound long before anybody ever built on it, and after that had been a battlefield in the Revolutionary War. And then there were the various rivals Tony had dragged back through the years, most of whom had ended up never leaving. And the vengeful spirits that had followed a few of the vamps home, wanting a little post-carnage payback. The final result was basically ghost central, with the glowing trails they left so thick on the floor and walls and ceiling that the whole room pulsed neon.

“You know the guys around here hate other ghosts,” Billy said, whipping his head around at some sound I couldn’t hear. “Like, really, really hate them!”

“This is supposed to be sacred ground,” I pointed out. “The original owners didn’t like the newbies, and they’ve been battling it out ever since.”

“Yeah, well, they can battle it out without me,” Billy said. “I’m done.” And he started to disappear back into his necklace, which, since he haunted it, was neutral ground.

At least he did until I hauled him back out again.

“Laura won’t hurt you,” I said, wrestling him for control. “She’s one of the sweetest ghosts I ever met. She just likes to play.”

“Yeah, I bet. With my bones, if I had any!”

“She isn’t like that!”

“Sure. ’Cause when the innocent little girl shows up in a horror flick, it’s always a good thing!”

“This isn’t a movie!” I told him, and wrenched the necklace back.

“Okay. Okay, sure. She’s fine. She’s wonderful. But what about the others?”

He had a point. The house was a war zone the humans never saw, as generations of spirits made and broke alliances, chased and occasionally cannibalized each other, and generally continued in death the battles they’d fought in life. And like in battles everywhere, the weak didn’t survive for long.

“I don’t want you to risk yourself,” I told him honestly. “Just take a look around, see if she’ll talk to you. You know what I need.”

“Yeah, your head examined!” Billy snapped. “She’s a ghost, it’s not like she’s going anywhere. You could find her in our own time, without the risk—”

“Don’t you think I thought of that?” I hissed. “The house is empty in our time. Nobody trusts Tony’s people—”

“Can’t imagine why,” Billy said sarcastically.

“—so they’ve been portioned out to other houses where they can be watched. Ever since he turned traitor, this place has stood empty. And without human energy to feed off of—”

“Ghosts go into hibernation mode,” he finished for me.

He ought to know; he was as active as he was only because I let him draw energy from me. Other ghosts did the same, on a much smaller scale, from anybody intruding into their territory, because humans shed living energy all the time, like skin cells. That was why ghost sightings were usually reported in cemeteries or old houses. It wasn’t just because their bodies often ended up there. It was because ghosts who originated elsewhere had a much harder time feeding enough to stay active.

“I can’t find her at Tony’s in our day,” I told him. “And every time I try going back in time alone, I almost get caught. This may be my only chance.” He looked like he wanted to argue, which Billy could do every bit as long as Laura could hide. But I didn’t have time for that, either. “Billy, please. I don’t know what else to do!”

He scowled. “That’s not fair.”

And it really wasn’t. We sniped and argued and bitched at each other all the time, worse than an old married couple. And that was okay; that was standard in the families both of us had grown up in. But we didn’t handle the softer emotions so well, because we hadn’t encountered them too often.

Billy had been part of a raucous family of ten kids, and while I got the impression that his parents had been affectionate to a degree, there had been only so much to go around. And he’d often been lost in the shuffle. And as for me . . .

Well, growing up at Tony’s had been a lot of things, but affectionate wasn’t really one of them.

As a result, both of us preferred to stand aloof from the softer stuff, or to ignore it entirely. So yeah, teary-

eyed pleading was kind of cheating. But I was desperate.

Billy made a disgusted sound after a minute and looked heavenward, why I don't know. He'd been actively avoiding it for something like a hundred and fifty years now. Then he took off without another word, but with an irritated flourish that let me know that I'd pay for this eventually.

That was okay, that was fine.

I'd worry about the fallout later.

Right now I just needed to find her.

"Come on," I wheedled, trying to sound calm and sweet. "I'm out of practice."

Nothing. Just a dark, echoing room, crossed and crisscrossed by ghost trails. So thick and so confusing that the Sight was no damned good at all.

"Damn it, Laura!"

And, finally, someone giggled.

It was hard to tell where it came from over the sound of the wind and rain, but patience had never been Laura's strong suit. A second later, there was an extra flutter next to the long sheers by a window. I lunged as she ran, too relieved to be careful, and slipped on a rug. And ended up falling straight through her.

"No fair fading!" I gasped, hitting hardwood.

She laughed, skipping merrily through the half-open door and into the hall as I scrambled to my feet. But she nodded. "No fading."

"No foolies?" I asked, following her. Because otherwise, it didn't count.

"No foolies," she agreed solemnly.

And then she stepped through a wall.

Technically that wasn't fading. It was also her patented get-out-of-jail-free card, since the child I had been couldn't follow. It was why she'd won, nine times out of ten, when we played this game. But I'd learned a few things since the last time, and a second later, I stepped through the wall after her.

Well, not exactly stepped. I shifted, moving spatially through the power of my office, just like I'd moved through time to get us here. It was a good trick, as Laura's face showed when I rematerialized a couple feet behind her. "How'd you do that?" she asked, eyes bright.

And then she took off again, vanishing through a bookcase.

I went after her, trying to remember the layout of these rooms as I ran. Because unlike Laura, I do not go incorporeal when I shift. I just pop out of one place and into another, and popping into the middle of a chair or a table wouldn't be fun. So my nerves were taking a beating even before I pelted across another room, shifted through a fireplace, barely missed skewering myself on a poker, and darted out into the hall—

And caught sight of Laura skipping straight through the middle of a couple of men headed this way.

Or no, I thought, suddenly frozen.

Not men.

At least, not anymore.

They were coming down a gorgeous old spiral staircase, one of the house's best features. It was made out of oak but had been burnished to a dark shine by the oil on thousands of hands over hundreds of years. But it didn't hold a candle to the vampires using it. Well, one of them, anyway.

Mircea Basarab, Tony's elegant master, would have probably made my heart race in plain old jeans. I say that probably because I'd never seen him in anything so plebian, and tonight was no exception. A shimmering fall of midnight hair fell onto shoulders encased in a tuxedo so perfectly tailored he might have just stepped out of a photo shoot. The hair was actually mahogany brown, not black as it looked in the low light, but the broad shoulders, trim waist, and air of barely leashed power were no illusions.

Still, he looked a little out of place in a house where his host was lucky if he remembered to keep his tie out of the soup. Since Mircea never looked out of place anywhere, I assumed there was a reason he had decided to go all out. Probably the same one that had Tony forcing a family on a strict diet to sit through a feast every night.

For a second I wished I could have seen Tony, his three-hundred-plus pounds stuffed into a penguin suit, for once as supremely uncomfortable at one of his dinners as everyone else. But I wasn't going to. Because the vamp at Mircea's side, the one with the dark curly hair and the goatee and the deceptively kind brown eyes, wasn't Tony.

Shit, I thought viciously, and backed swiftly into the room I'd just run out of.

Which was absolutely the right thing to do.

At least it was until they followed me in.

In a panic, I shifted—also the right move, since there were no other doors out of there. But shifting in a split second in a panic isn't easy, and this time I didn't manage it. Or, rather, I didn't completely manage it.

Son of a bitch! I thought desperately, finding myself trapped in the fireplace as two high-level master vampires walked into the room.

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