

DESIRE BY STARLIGHT

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Women loved Cassandra Hart—even her press releases said so. Jenna’s quick peek at the seemingly endless line of fans snaking up to the signing table at the Barnes & Noble in Hoboken, New Jersey, indicated quite a few men loved her too. True, the jostling, eager readers had come to see Cassandra Hart, *New York Times* best-selling romance author, and not Jenna Hardy, but that was just fine with her. She loved being Cassandra Hart, especially on nights like this one. Tonight she’d wowed a sell-out crowd, and the satisfaction was nearly as good as sex.

No matter how many successes she had, she still suffered a few pangs of anxiety before every book launch, but this event had been standing room only. She’d chosen a steamy scene from her newest romance featuring sexy federal agents and renegade mercenaries, and the applause when she’d finished had vibrated through her with the electrifying charge of an orgasm. Riding high, her pulse racing and her body tingling, she’d let the question-and-answer period go overtime and now her signing was running late too. Her publicist, agent, and good friend Alice Smith signaled vigorously from the back of the room and the message was unmistakable. *Stop signing! Time to wrap this up!*

Pretending not to see Alice’s semaphore-like arm motions, Jenna accepted the next book, already opened to the page she usually signed, from the store assistant. She smiled up at a youngish blonde in blue jeans and a tight long-sleeved T-shirt that announced *EMTs Do It Better*.

“Hello,” Jenna said, meeting the woman’s gleaming blue eyes. “Thank you so much for coming. How are you tonight?”

“I’m wonderful! I just love your books, Ms. Hart.” The blonde’s dazzling smile widened. “And I *really* love Cyn Reynolds. She could arrest me any day.”

“I’m with you,” Jenna said, laughing at the frequent comment about one of her recurring characters. “I’m so glad you could come tonight.”

Jenna loved talking with her readers. Writing was such a solitary experience, something she did alone hour after hour in a silent room, and she often wondered if it really mattered to anyone what she was doing. But hearing the excitement in this woman’s voice, she was reminded of one of the most important reasons that she wrote. For a few brief moments her words connected her to other human beings, and she was no longer alone. “To whom would you like me to sign this?”

“Oh, could you sign it to me—oh, I’m Sally—and could you say—Happy birthday, from Cassandra. And?”—the blonde hesitated, blushing—“could I get my picture with you?”

“Of course.” Jenna rose, ignoring Alice’s frown and pointed look at her wristwatch. Readers like Sally made her life possible, so she took her time with every one, asking their name, writing a personal message in their book, thanking them for their support. She waited until Sally came around the table to stand beside her, then lightly clasped her waist and smiled as the store assistant, using Sally’s camera, took their picture. Then she sat down, took the next hardback passed to her, and greeted another reader.

A faint cloud of Obsession accompanied the firm press of a hand against her shoulder.

“You need to pull the plug on this,” Alice murmured in her ear. “You have an early flight in the morning, double bookings in the afternoon and evening, and you look completely exhausted. I told you that signing last night was a bad idea.”

“I’m all right.” Jenna pressed a hand to her midsection, hunger pangs reminding her she hadn’t eaten after rushing from the airport to the hotel, hurriedly changing, and grabbing a cab over to the

bookstore. Her flight from Washington, DC, where she had given a reading at a small bookstore in Dupont Circle, had been delayed, and she'd barely gotten any sleep. She was still glad she'd squeezed in the extra event, despite Alice's protests. She hadn't sold very many books, but the audience members—largely gay and lesbian—were among her staunchest supporters. She frequently reminded Alice that a great deal of her success lay in being accessible to those who bought her books. Unlike many best-selling authors, she still did small independent bookstore events even though Alice nagged her to conserve her time and energy for the national tours. Feeling Alice's glare on the back of her neck like an angry wasp, she tried to stretch out the cramps in her lower back without Alice noticing. "How many more in line?"

"More than you can handle."

"Just a little while longer." Jenna tuned out Alice's long-suffering sigh and focused on an elderly gentleman in a three-piece suit who looked only moderately uncomfortable surrounded by the primarily female crowd. "Hi, so nice to see you."

He held out her newest title, whose cover featured two camo-clad women in a tight clinch against a backdrop of strafing tracers. "I'd like to get this for my wife. Her name is Joan."

"Wonderful," Jenna said. "Shall I say it's from you?"

He looked momentarily abashed, then smiled broadly. "Yes please. Could you say, 'Love from Martin'—and then your name, of course."

Jenna wrote the message and signed *Cassandra Hart* with her trademark flourish. "Here you are."

As she handed the book back, she caught sight of the glossy promotional photograph on the back cover of a woman standing on a bridge high above the Hudson, chestnut hair stylishly windblown and wide-set green eyes just the tiniest bit provocative. Like always, she experienced a moment of confusion. Was that really her? Cassandra Hart looked confident, sexy, and a little bit sinful. Jenna had worked hard to create that image, to become that woman, and if she had to get by on a couple hours' sleep and airport food a few months a year to ensure she remained that woman, she would. Gladly.

“I’m sorry,” the store manager announced to the remaining fans in a pleasant voice, “but we’re going to have to end our event for the evening. We will have signed copies of Cassandra’s newest book at the registers for those of you in line who would like to purchase one, but they will not be personalized. We’re so sorry, but Ms. Hart is finished signing for the night.”

Jenna knew better than to argue. If she did, Alice was likely to drag her bodily from the store. She pushed back from the table and was about to stand when a willowy redhead in a beige linen suit and open-collared emerald green shirt the exact color of her eyes stopped in front of the table and leaned down, one hand braced on the tabletop in an unexpectedly intimate pose.

“I’m sure you’ve had a very long day,” the redhead said, “and I won’t keep you. I just wanted to tell you that my fifteen-year-old niece thinks you are the most astonishing author on the planet. It means a lot that she can feel good about herself because of what you write. So—thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Jenna settled back into her chair and grabbed a book from the box the assistant was refilling. She opened it to the title page. “What’s your niece’s name?”

“Meg.”

The redhead’s voice was low and melodious and her emerald eyes so intense they might have been the actual gemstones.

“Have you read this one?” Jenna asked, her pen poised over the page.

“Not yet.”

The woman leaned closer, her expression so magnetic everyone else in the room faded to sepia. “I have a confession to make.”

“Really?” Jenna searched for a sign the redhead’s intent matched her seductive tone. Oh yes indeed, there was an invitation in that hot gaze, if she wanted to play. “And what deep dark secrets are you hiding?”

“I don’t really read romances. I prefer thrillers.”

“Somehow I don’t find that particularly surprising.” Jenna had the urge to lean away precisely because she *wanted* to move forward, deeper into the redhead’s space. She wasn’t used to being captivated

by a woman. That was *her* role. In fact, her Number One Rule was to never go to bed with a woman she couldn't control.

"I heard your reading tonight," the woman went on, "and if the rest of the book is as good as the sex, I think I could be missing something."

"Perhaps if you gave it a try," Jenna said, "you might be converted."

An arched brow winged upward. "Try what? The sex or the book?"

Jenna hesitated, considering. She was hungry, she was tired, and after three weeks on the road, she still had another four weeks ahead of her. She should grab a quick shower and a few hours' sleep. But she loved the pace, she loved the excitement, and she loved the unexpected. This redhead was definitely unexpected, she was too charged to sleep, and she hadn't had sex for months. She plucked a bookmark off the stack remaining on the table, turned it over, and wrote the name of her hotel along with her room number. She slid it into the book after writing on the title page: *Dear Meg, Celebrate your life and all the wonderful things to come. Love, Cassandra Hart.* Handing the closed book to the redhead, she said, "The evening's activities are up to you. Keep the bookmark."

"Oh, I've already made up my mind."

"Don't tell me. I like surprises."

The woman laughed, pulled the bookmark free and slid it into her jacket pocket, and sauntered away. Watching her go, Jenna finally rose from the table and smiled at the thought of what other surprises the night might bring.

"You don't have time for that." Alice drew Jenna away from the table with one hand on her elbow. "It's almost eleven and you need to be at the airport by six."

Jenna regarded the woman to whom she attributed much of her success. At forty, Alice looked a decade younger. Her milk chocolate eyes and sharply contrasting silver-blond hair added to the allure of a sensuous smile. An inch or two shorter than Jenna's five-eight, she was voluptuous where Jenna could barely boast curves. Many an editor and publisher had looked at Alice and seen a throwback to the

pinup starlets of an earlier age. They underestimated her barracuda instincts when negotiating contracts, much to Jenna's benefit. She and Alice were very close friends, but business always came first for Alice. Jenna didn't mind. She felt the same.

"When have I ever been late for a flight?" Jenna draped her navy silk blazer over her arm. June had turned the corner into summer and she hadn't needed to wear it over her white silk tee.

"I'm the one who makes your schedule, remember?" Alice spoke quietly so those nearby would not hear. "We can't afford for you to burn out, especially not for something as trivial as a quickie—"

"If you were getting a little something a little more regularly," Jenna teased, "you would appreciate the benefits of physical therapy."

"Then I'll schedule you a *massage* in Chicago."

"Wonderful." Jenna skirted around the table to put an end to the conversation. She glanced back over her shoulder and flashed Alice a grin. "Make sure you sign me up for the full body package."



Jenna finally dragged herself into her hotel room just before midnight and immediately kicked off her low heels and shed the navy pants that matched her blazer. While dialing room service, she powered up her laptop and checked her e-mail. Her editor had sent the galleys for her next novel, the story of a returning soldier who fell in love with the widow of one of her fallen comrades, and she downloaded that while ordering shrimp cocktail and a salad.

"How soon can you bring that?" Forty-five minutes. Plenty of time for a shower. "That's great. Thanks."

She deposited her underwear into a laundry bag, folded her suit into her suitcase to deliver to the hotel dry cleaners as soon as she reached her next destination, and padded nude toward the bathroom. Her eyes stung with fatigue and the turned-down bed called to her invitingly as she passed, but she wanted to get to the galleys tonight.

And she really should eat something. She'd noticed when getting dressed earlier that her waistband was loose and she was dropping weight she really couldn't afford to do without. Always on the thin side, despite having what her stepmother Darlene called a trucker's appetite, she had trouble maintaining her weight when her schedule was so hectic she often forgot meals. She could review the galleys while she ate—multitasking was her forte, after all. Besides, there was always the possibility she might have company if the bookmark message did its job.

Smiling at the memory of the sexy redhead from the bookstore, Jenna stepped under the warm water, tilted her head back, and let the spray wash away some of the weariness. Beneath the exhaustion, she was still soaring with the evening's success. That charge kept her going, gave her more satisfaction than anything else she'd ever known, and she never wanted the high to end. The breakneck pace of her life, like a train hurtling forward, carried her far beyond the past she wanted to forget.

She'd discovered by accident when she was ten or eleven that the voices of the characters she created in her imagination drowned out the sounds of Darlene's harsh criticism, muffled the loud curses outside her window of drunks wandering home through the trailer park in the small hours of the night, and muted the insidious none-too-subtle putdowns of the kids in school. Never had she dreamed then that her escape into those fictional worlds would someday provide her freedom from a life she abhorred.

Fifteen minutes later, clean and relatively refreshed, Jenna wrapped herself in the plush white robe offered by the hotel and sat down at the desk to answer e-mail while awaiting her late-night supper. Before she made it through her unread mail, the bell outside her suite chimed. A quick glance at the clock sent her heart racing. Too soon to be room service.

She opened the door to the length of the security chain. "Yes?"

"Ms. Hart?" a female voice inquired.

"Yes?" Jenna's pulse kicked higher.

“I thought I should return this to you.” Her bookmark emerged through the three-inch opening, held between well-manicured, tapered fingers.

Heat flared in the pit of her stomach, and Jenna tilted her head to see out into the hall. The redhead smiled back.

“What’s your name?” Jenna asked.

“Brin MacIntyre.”

“I just ordered room service. Are you hungry?”

“Eternally.”

Laughing, Jenna closed the door, slid the security chain free, and opened it. “I thought you said you didn’t read romances?”

Again, the red-gold brow winged upward as Brin stepped inside. “I don’t follow.”

“I believe you’re quoting one of my books with that line.”

“Is it getting me anywhere?”

“Oh yes.”

Jenna slid the chain back on, wrapped her arms around Brin’s neck, and kissed her. The kiss started out languid and soft, just a slow exploration. Brin was a very good kisser. With a tug from Brin, the tie on Jenna’s robe came loose and warm hands clasped Jenna’s waist. Her breasts tightened and her nipples hardened. The arousal was automatic, pleasant, welcomed.

Leaning back from the kiss, Jenna assessed her partner. Brin’s eyes were glinting hotly, her mouth a sensuous curve. She looked as confident as her kiss suggested she was. Jenna wanted more of those hard kisses and demanding hands, just as soon as she was sure Brin agreed to her Number One Rule. She was in charge.

“I want to take you to bed,” Jenna said. “First I want that beautiful mouth of yours”—she brushed her thumb over Brin’s lower lip and moaned softly when Brin gently bit her—“on me until I come. Then I intend to make you come, more than once.”

“No complaint from me,” Brin murmured without hesitation.

“You should know, too, I’ll be leaving at five in the morning.”

“Then we shouldn’t waste any time.” Brin walked Jenna backwards to the open bed, gently eased the robe from Jenna’s shoulders, and guided her down. Holding Jenna’s gaze, Brin

unbuckled her belt and pulled her shirt from her pants. She had just opened the last button, exposing small breasts beneath a pale silk bra, when the doorbell rang again.

“Damn, that’s room service,” Jenna moaned, already so wet, so ready for that first searing caress she hurt.

Brin smiled and crossed to the door. Without opening it, she said, “Leave it in the hall.”

“Very well,” a voice from outside responded.

Within seconds, Brin eased into bed, braced herself on her forearms, and settled her hips between Jenna’s thighs. The pressure against Jenna’s clitoris made her stomach tighten.

“God, you feel good,” Jenna whispered.

“I’m going to make you feel a whole lot better very, very soon.”

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Gard Davis studied the corpse.

The elderly woman lay on her back beneath a handmade quilt in a handsomely crafted bed that Gard was willing to bet had been in this woman’s family for over a hundred years. Although her skin was tinged with the faint blue of death, she was still beautiful. Her thick white hair flowed softly around a delicately sculpted face that, despite the decades, remained poignantly elegant. Gard saw no evidence of struggle, pain, or anything amiss, but she went through the prescribed steps because the deceased, and her family, deserved her best. She felt for a pulse in the carotid and radial arteries, and found none. She placed her stethoscope on the chest and listened for breath sounds or a heartbeat, but the torso remained motionless and deeply silent. Straightening, she arranged the covers until only the woman’s face showed against the soft linen pillowslip.

“What do you think?” asked Rob Richards.

“I think Elizabeth Hardy was a very lucky woman.”

“Huh?” Rob’s broad, open face puckered with confusion as he surveyed the dead woman. He was reliable and loyal, and unfailingly literal.

“What is she, ninety-four? Ninety-five? She died in her sleep.” Gard shook her head. “She’s lived all her life on this farm. As near as I can tell, she loved it. I hope I die in my sleep in my own bed when I’m her age.”

Gard couldn’t imagine dying with the sense of peace Elizabeth Hardy seemed to have attained. She was already thirty-three and had spent most of the last decade rootless. She didn’t see happiness in her future, not after losing her family, her lover, her social status, and pretty much everything that had defined her—or what she’d thought had defined her. With an irritated shake of her head, she turned to the paperwork she needed to fill out.

“You can go ahead and get the gurney, Rob. We’ll take her over to Simpson’s funeral parlor.”

“Shouldn’t we call someone?”

“I know she doesn’t have any family around here, and I don’t want to leave the body in the house. It’s going to hit ninety tomorrow. We’ll let Mark Simpson do what needs to be done while we call the sheriff and have her track down the family, if there is any. Then I’ll call them.”

“Okay, Gard. I’ll be back in a couple minutes.”

“No rush,” Gard told her assistant. Elizabeth Hardy was in no hurry, and neither was she. She had farm calls to make in the morning, but one thing she had plenty of now was time.