

SIREN SONG
by Cat Adams
Chapter 1

The limo was long and sleek, an extended number in gleaming white, polished to a shine that was almost blinding under the bright lights outside the restaurant. It seemed a little excessive for just two people, but it was the first in line, and none of the other models were any less ostentatious. I'm not normally impressed by that sort of thing, so it's saying something that they got to me. I ride in limos fairly often. I'm a bodyguard. When I'm on "close" duty, I'm with the protectee in the car. Most of the time, however, I'm in one of the caravan vehicles, either in front or behind the main car. Suits me fine. I'm a working class type of person.

Tonight I was one of the VIPs. Weird, very weird. We'd been having a wake for my best friend in life or death, Vicki Cooper, who'd been wealthy even by Hollywood standards. She'd been murdered by magic while supposedly "safe" in her own room in a guarded facility. The most unique part of the whole affair was that the deceased had attended the party. Vicki had been a powerful clairvoyant in life, a level 9—and to my knowledge, there *aren't* any level 10s. In death, she was proving herself to be an equally powerful, sentient spirit . . . bound to earth by unfinished business. The trouble was, nobody knew yet what was going to cause her to 'move on' to the next reality and, although she *could* communicate with people, especially me, she wasn't sharing.

Another handful of glitter and confetti dropped on me, but there was none of the exuberance to it that there had been an hour before. Vicki was tired. No matter how you cut it, she's a ghost now, and didn't have unlimited power. I looked up after dusting the glitter from my face. "It's okay, Vick. Go rest. The party's over." She'd been a real trooper, staying in this realm for a four hour event. She'd spun piñatas for breaking, chilled margaritas all over the room, and had touched each and every person at the event with a cool 'hug' of air. Tears had mingled with laughter as we said our good-byes to one of the most amazing people we'd ever had the privilege of knowing.

Her breeze swirled around me like a miniature dust devil for a moment before dissolving and leaving a strange stillness to cover me like a shroud. A woman whose name I couldn't remember stumbled against the side of the limo behind, her movements sloppy from too many drinks. We'd known ahead of time that everyone would be drinking to ease the pain, so arrangements had been made to keep people from having to drive.

There was a light brush of smooth fingers on my arm and I turned my head to the tanned, silver-haired man next to me. That touch sucked back into the real world, which was a worse place for the loss of my friend. I wrapped my arms around my body, even though the California night was warm, almost sultry. "We should get back. It's late."

I nodded and let Dr. Scott climb in first. He'd been Vicki's psychiatrist at Birchwoods, the expensive, in-patient, supposedly magic-proof facility that had still somehow failed to protect her from death. He was soon to be my court-appointed guide to *normalcy*—or so everyone claimed. I wouldn't have trusted him except that Vicki did. She'd personally invited him to the wake—*after* her death. It was hard to argue with that sort of recommendation.

He immediately set to opening the skylight. I didn't blame him. It was a beautiful night. The wake had, for the most part, gone well. Notwithstanding a little interruption by the princess

of the sirens, who challenged me to a death duel, a good time had been had by all, and more than a few good memories shared.

I wasn't exactly unsteady on my feet, but I wasn't completely sober either. The owner of the restaurant-slash-cantina had been a friend of Vicki's too, and she fixed a mean margarita when distraught. There was probably as much salt from tears in each drink as there was around the rim, and easily double the alcohol. That meant I was feeling the effects. Pity it wouldn't last long. My metabolism had been altered significantly by a vampire bite that, while it hadn't succeeded in making me undead, had done some truly remarkable things to my body. But, for the moment at least, I was just a teeny bit tipsy.

It made remembering both easier, and harder.

"Ten-four. Area secure. Let's start them moving." The uniformed officer wasn't talking to me, but into a radio. Still, it made me turn my head, even though the flashing lights were giving my newly acquired vampire vision a headache. My escort back to Birchwoods tonight would be a pair of police vehicles. I should mention that I am *not* insane . . . well, no more than the next guy. Nor am I a criminal . . . exactly. But sometimes you get caught in the middle of something bigger than you, and you have to make a choice. The choice I made risked everything, but for a good cause. Innocent lives would have been lost—hundreds, if not thousands of them. Sadly, there's always a consequence to a decision that big.

I'd deliberately used my burgeoning psychic talents to manipulate a whole slew of people, including quite a few police officers, into doing what needed to be done. Psychic manipulation is a big legal no-no. And while they haven't been able to *prove* it yet—especially since I failed their telepathy tests spectacularly, *I* knew I'd done it, so I wasn't fighting too hard.

I'd been given a choice of committing myself to a private facility or risk being declared a "threat to the public" and getting sent to one of the state run prison-slash-asylums until my case came to trial. Normally that would be *never*. Speedy trials do not exist for the furry—or for most of the other preternatural types. (Yes, the ACLU is working on it. But they've been working on it for a couple of decades now without success.) I'd heard the rumors, seen the undercover news specials about the abuses in those places. As such, I figured I'd rather die than get stuck in one. And while I wasn't exactly thrilled about the notion of incarceration, Birchwoods was certainly preferable to dying. Thankfully, because I'd managed to wrangle a stay in a private institution, with good doctors, and one that might actually let me *out* eventually, I was actually going to get a hearing in this lifetime. Of course, the hearing might well put me in there for the rest of my life, like Vicki, so I wasn't precisely looking forward to the adventure.

But I was not going to think about that tonight. Tonight was for happier thoughts. Right on cue Bruno came up beside me, snaking his arm around my waist. I turned into his embrace, smiling. Back in college Bruno DeLuca and I had been a couple. We'd even gone so far as to get engaged. It hadn't worked out. Maybe we were too young. And then, of course, there was the friction between me and his family. Whatever the cause, we'd broken up. I'd never completely gotten over him.

"How you holding up?" He smiled and I melted. Mind you, my reaction wasn't just because of his looks, although he's certainly drool worthy. Tall, dark and studly he comes from solid Italian-American working stock in Jersey. His tousled dark curls have just a touch of silver now, and there are faint lines on the handsome face: laugh lines mostly, but a few others. Life has been good, you can tell. But it hasn't been easy for him, any more than it has me.

"Not too bad. How about you?" He shrugged. It had been both a good and bad day. The

wake was bad, but he'd gotten a job offer out of it too. That's the other part of my attraction to him. I respect the talent that makes him headhunting-worthy enormously. Bruno is a mage, and a damned good one. He has a lot of power. More than that, he keeps people safe through *skill*. When you're dealing with heavy duty black magical forces it is all about the control. He's smart, he's savvy, and when push comes to shove he can be a cold, hard bastard. If it hadn't been for the fact that his talent makes upright, uptight corporate America safe and profitable, and the fact he's so insanely honest, he might have given his cousin, Little Joey, a run for it in taking charge of the Family businesses. I only *suspect* the capital 'F' on the word, by the way. I have no actual proof, and have never had the nerve to ask.

As it is he works as one of the top mages at one of the big four international companies. I suspect he makes obscene amounts of money doing it. I've never asked. It'd be rude. I honestly don't care about that other than to be happy for him. I make a good living of my own guarding the wealthy and paranoid.

He kissed my cheek and warmth tingled through my body. I would have liked to have done more, never mind the guards watching his every movement. But there'll be time. His voice whispered into my consciousness as his lips nuzzled my ear. "Love you. We'll talk soon." Wow. I'm still having a hard time believing my good luck. He loves me. We're going to have another chance as a couple. Really, I mean . . . wow. There have been other men in my life, plenty of them. But Bruno is . . . well . . . *Bruno*. He has *joi de vivre*, big brass cojones, and *style*. He understands me better than anyone—even gets my sense of humor. Sarcasm, dry wit, or absolute slapstick, he can make me laugh, even when things are at their absolute bleakest. Once I can laugh at something, we face it. Together. I never have to worry about my back when Bruno's around.

Looking up into Bruno's sparkling brown eyes I couldn't resist stealing another kiss. Blame the tequila.

I'd meant for it to be a quick peck. Apparently he had other ideas.

When the world realigned on its axis, and I got my breath back, Dr. Scott was leaning out the door giving a pointed "cough."

Bruno just laughed, giving me a firm pat on the backside that sent me a half-step toward the curb. "Go on. I've got to get back to Jersey, finish work out the details and break the news to the family."

"Ah. Good luck with that." He made a face that matched mine. Suddenly a stay at Birchwoods didn't sound so bad. Mama DeLuca hates me. She was so not going to be happy about her baby and I getting back together. As to him moving to the west coast—let me be in a nice locked facility when she found that one out. Please.

He laughed, probably reading my mind. The really good mages can do that. It's how he got the job offer across a crowded and noisy bar. "It'll be fine." He assured me. "I'll handle it." I shook my head at his antics, blew him a kiss goodbye, and climbed in the car.

The first thing I did was slide across the luxurious gray leather. I deliberately positioned myself to make the most of the skylight then allowed myself to sink into a seat that was made for comfort. Fresh air would be good for me, and I love looking up at the stars. My own car is a convertible, and I ride with the top down as often as I can. Only at night now, sadly, thanks to the new vampire blood. Imagine, living in California and I'm now allergic to the *sun*! It pisses me off, but there's not much I can do about it. So I'm doing my best to think of other things. Of course *that'll* come to a screeching halt once I start therapy. Doctors tend to insist on you

dredging up every possible negative memory and feeling—especially things you’d buried for good reason.

Oh joy. Just thinking about it took the shiny off of my mood.

“I hope you’re not in a hurry.” Dr. Scott said. It’s a nice night, so I told the driver to take Ocean View.”

I snorted and crossed my arms over my chest like a suddenly petulant child. The reality was beginning to sink home and with it, the fear about my future. “Why would I be in a hurry? I’m only leaving behind my job, my house, all of my clothes, plus my best friend, my boyfriend and, gee . . . *solid food*.” I tried to keep the bitterness out of my voice, without success.

“Celia, everything’s going to be fine. You’ll see.”

I gave another snort and raised my brows at him. My first meeting with the good doctor resulted in my stalking his secretary like a deer and chasing him out of the room in panic. I hadn’t been safe to talk until after he locked me inside his office with a pitcher of cow blood, which I happily sucked down like a strawberry milk shake. Since I knew the telepathic doctor was likely reading my mind, I commented on the memory. “Gosh, that was a fun episode. Can’t wait for the reruns. How about you?”

He had the decency to look chagrined.

I heard the driver’s door slam shut and it moved my attention from him, giving him the opportunity to fiddle with the buttons on the side panel. Probably looking for another stiff drink to bolster him for the start of this adventure. My brow furrowed suddenly, because I felt . . . something. It was an odd, pins-and-needles tingling sensation that I was beginning to associate with magical barriers. I’d never been able to get even a hint of the magical before the vampire bite. Now I’m aware of nearly each and every one of them. The more power they use, the more painful. This one *hurt*.

I sat bolt upright in my seat, actually flinching when I heard the automatic locks click with what felt like an ominous finality.

“What’s wrong?” As a trained observer of human behavior Dr. Scott didn’t like the vibe I was giving off. He was suddenly very alert and looked completely businesslike.

“Maybe nothing.” I answered. My voice stayed steady, but sounded uneasy. It didn’t feel like nothing. I could feel the pressure building, making me want to wiggle my jaw like you do in an airplane to get your ears to pop. There are protective spells that can be used to keep objects, including vehicles, from damage. But they’re hideously expensive, difficult to do, and create enough friction when a car is in motion to make any model a gas hog. A limo like this one was built like a tank. It shouldn’t *need* that kind of a spell, and I hadn’t sensed enough magical ability in any of the uniforms to pull it off. While it wouldn’t take someone of Bruno’s level, it would take at least a level 4, and I should have felt one.

But if it wasn’t a protection spell, then what was it?

Maybe it was the liquor making me slow, but I couldn’t think of a damned thing. Which made me suspicious. Well, more suspicious. I’ve been a bodyguard so long that I’m always a little bit paranoid. “Can you sense the driver?”

The car moved smoothly away from the curb, fitting nicely in between the pair of police cruisers. I could see it through the window . . . barely. Mostly I just saw my reflection on the inside of the glass. The woman I saw was attractive, but cold, hard. It was my “business face.” I use it a lot. So often, that sometimes even I forget the softer me exists.

“That would be illegal.” Dr. Scott didn’t bother to hide the disapproval in his voice. It

was combined with the stern look of an instructor.

I shook my head. “No doctor. Reading his mind is illegal. Just sensing to see if he’s ‘there’ isn’t.” It was a fine distinction, but I was learning a lot about those as we prepared for my upcoming trial. I had one of the best defense attorneys in the business. If he was successful I would be a free, if considerably less wealthy, woman. I could live with that. If I stayed out of jail I could always earn more money.

I pretended not to notice him staring at me, concentrating instead on the scene outside the glass. We’d turned left. It wouldn’t have been a big deal except for one little detail. The nearest exit to Ocean View was three blocks down and on the right.

Dr. Scott’s eyes locked with mine in the glass. If he was checking my thoughts, I couldn’t tell. At the moment I wouldn’t even mind. Best for him to find out for himself that I wasn’t joking. I was beginning to suspect we were in very real trouble. I watched in the glass as he pursed his lips thoughtfully. Seeming to reach a decision, his face went distant and blank for a few seconds.

“That’s odd. I can’t sense him at all.” He sounded puzzled, and not altogether happy.

I turned to face him, “Null?” I made it a question. Psychic nulls were rare, but not unheard of. I’d very briefly been assigned to a shrink that was a null. She was completely immune to magic, and to psychic manipulation. Which would’ve made her the perfect doctor for someone like me, if she hadn’t also been one of the bad guys. As it was, her drugging me and setting me up for murder had started the chain of events leading up to my legal woes—and undoubtedly set my therapy back *years*.

“No. It feels more as if I’m being blocked.”

I wouldn’t have thought I could tense any further, but I did as the adrenaline pumped through my system. We’d just taken another left turn. Which meant we weren’t headed toward the main highway exits heading toward Birchwoods either. We were going the exact opposite direction—and while I couldn’t be sure, yet, it appeared we were en route to the desert, where there was miles and miles of nothing. . . right up until you got to the state run facility for ‘rogue’ monsters and psychics.

“Doctor, are you lying to me?” There was a growling, hissing tone to my voice, and my skin had started to glow, giving off a pale, gray-green light that filled the passenger compartment like water in a pool. It was decidedly spooky. In just a few days I’ve grown to hate that, but right now it might prove useful in scaring the doctor. If he was scared maybe, just maybe, he’d be honest with me. Of course, getting angry was liable to push the limits of my control over the monster in me. But I needed the truth, and I didn’t have a lot of options as to how I was going to get it.

He shrugged, but was more interested in concentrating on whatever was pushing him away. “Why would I lie?”

I waved my hand in front of his face to grab his attention and then pointed. “Look out the window.”

He tried, even going so far as to press his nose to the glass. “I can barely see through the tinting. What am I looking for?”

No surprise there. I had the advantage of vampire-style vision. “Try looking out through the sunroof.” I toned back on the spookometer. I wasn’t scaring the doctor so much as pissing him off. I couldn’t be positive, but I was beginning to think he didn’t know any more about what was going on than I did, that maybe his choosing to ride in the limo with me had been an

unexpected complication for whoever was running this little show.

He stood up, flattening his hand against the seat to steady himself from the vehicle's movement and the drinks he'd had earlier. He had to push his way through the invisible barrier surrounding the car, and I felt an odd lurch in my stomach as it stretched to accommodate the movement. He noticed it too, and pushed against it, smoothing his hands along to test the barrier like a mime on a street corner.

"We're headed toward the desert." He sounded honestly shocked, afraid, and more than a little sick.

"Yes." My voice could've frosted the glass.

I had to give the man credit. He had brains. "You think I set you up?" There was a hint of caution in his voice. Not fear. He was too tough for that. But he was bright enough to not want to be locked alone in the back of a limo with an angry 'monster.' Taking me to the state facility would most assuredly piss me off.

"The thought did occur to me." I admitted.

He lowered himself carefully onto the seat. Leaning back, he closed his eyes. "I can assure you that, if I'd intended to turn you over to the state I would *not* be stupid enough to ride in the car with you. And as I told you before, I wouldn't consign a rabid dog to the state facilities."

I gave him a humorless smile. "I remember that."

"Oh good." His voice practically dripped sarcasm. "So now what?"

"Let me try your cell phone."

He blinked at me, but reached inside his suit jacket to retrieve it. He was slower on the uptake than normal. The result of the liquor, no doubt, but not particularly helpful. My own inebriation was long gone.

"If I'm just being paranoid, it should work just fine." I explained as he passed the top-of-the-line tech toy to me.

"And if it doesn't?"

I punched the number for Alex's cell phone. Vicki's former lover had been at the wake, so she should still be close by. She was also a cop. She could find out if this was legit. If it wasn't, she could get us help. Assuming I could get a call through.

I waited for the telltale ringing, and instead heard only crackling static. Damn. "Well, we're screwed."