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SIREN SONG

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CHAPTER ONE

They wanted her.

As Chloe sang, the funky bass line pounded through her body and sexual energy sparked through the Annapolis night club. She was hot. She was on fire. She was *killing* it. The crowd picked up the rhythm, sweating bodies twisting and moving. Her voice soared, a crescendo of music, pulsing beats with the wicked thrashing of guitar strings sending the crowd into a frenzy.

She had the audience in her thrall, and it felt so damned good. Under the flash of pink-and-green lights, she gyrated against the mic stand, exposing her fishnet stockings all the way to the top of her thigh; a midshipman's mouth parted in a silent gasp, as if she were putting on a private show just for him. Someone spilled a beer. Someone else cried out her name. Her magic wove its way through the crowd into the dark grain of the timber support beams, even seeping into the old cracked mortar between the bricks. And when she whipped her long dark hair to the drumbeat, exposing a shock of dyed pink hair beneath, she knew there was nothing, *nothing* they wouldn't do to have her and that no one could resist her.

No one but *him*.

For the past few nights, far away from the stage, one of the naval officers had watched her. It wasn't hard to spot them—even when they weren't in uniform—and for no good reason, he was. Navy guys were pretty much all the same, lonely and jacked up on testosterone. Easy lays. But this one was different. Solitary. Never ordering more than the two-drink minimum. Never tapping his foot to the music. Never applauding when the song was over... Just watching, as if he were immune to her spell. But was that even possible?

She hit the high notes of the song's finale, staring right at him, trying to break through whatever bulwark he'd thrown up against her charm. Trying to get him up out of his seat because he was standing between her and complete power, pure bliss. Want me, damn it, she thought. But he didn't react.

Her song ended with throaty cries—an exorcism of all her personal demons. Then

Chloe eased up a little bit. No need to drive the rest of the men too wild. There'd been a fight a few weeks before and she wasn't looking for a repeat performance.

"Thank you!" Chloe cried into the microphone, and applause thundered through the Ram's Head venue, shaking the building. The audience erupted in shouts and calls for an encore.

Chloe's drummer was up off his stool, ready to fend off the surge of guys that rushed the stage. "You're a sick singer, girl," someone said. "You're gonna be a superstar!"

A man wearing a denim shirt and work boots rushed forward to buy her a drink, offering her the flower off his table. "Hey, why don't you give that to your waitress?" Chloe asked. "And tip her well. She's been on her feet all night."

Flower Guy had a dark mesmerized look as he threw a hundred-dollar bill on the table, seeming not to know or care how much he spent. He'd do anything she told him. He'd set fire to downtown Annapolis if she wanted him to. But what Chloe *really* wanted was to get a record contract.

As the next band got ready to take the stage, everyone was still cheering Chloe's performance. Everyone, that is, but the khaki-clad naval officer in the back. Who wore a uniform to a rock show? *What was his deal?* And why did she care? So one guy out of a hundred didn't swoon when she crooned. It shouldn't bother her. But it did. Maybe bother was the wrong word. More like, *intrigued* her.

With her Sex Pistols T-shirt plastered to her back and perspiration slipping over her belly ring into the waistband of her skirt, she caught him staring and felt an answering heat between her thighs. Maybe it was just the adrenaline. Putting on a performance like that would make any girl a little wild and wanton. Hell, to celebrate, tonight she wanted to go home with someone. With *him*.

Chloe's roommate shoved through the crowd with a towel and water. "Chloe, drink this before you fall down. Why do you keep looking at that jerk in the corner?"

Chloe slugged back half the bottle of springwater before coming up for air. "Cuz he's a total hottie.... Check out those forearms." In addition to those Popeye arms, he was older than the usual crowd. Aloof. Like some kind of feral cat she wanted to tame.

"I don't like the look of him," Sophia said. "He seems like the kind of man who would follow you to your car and—"

"Oh, he does not!" It was only natural for Sophia to be protective. After all, Sophia was one of the few people who knew what'd happened to Chloe from firsthand experience, not because she saw it on the news. But tonight, Chloe wanted to live on the wild side. "He just needs someone to scruff up his hair, rumple his uniform and rock his world."

To prove her point, Chloe sauntered over to the stranger's table. The houselights were up and Chloe noticed the rank insignia on his collar—a captain's eagle. A hotshot. An officer. But apparently, not a gentleman. He didn't stand up. Didn't offer her a seat. Just stared and took a long swallow from the clear liquid in his glass. And what the hell was he drinking anyway? *Sparkling water?*

"So, listen Captain America, what's your deal?" Chloe asked, toweling off the back of her neck. "Are you stalking me?"

"You could say that." He moved over in the booth so she could join him and she noticed a little silver-gray hair at each temple. She really liked that because, in her experience, older guys were just as sexy as the younger ones, but without all the bullshit.

She ordered a beer, then slid in beside him, her leather skirt sticking to the vinyl and riding up her long legs. Now that she was close to him, she was a little self-conscious. Singing and dancing on stage was sweaty work. But given the way his glance drifted down the curves of her body, she didn't figure he minded. It was the first sign that he had any interest in her at all, so Chloe gave him her best come-hither smile—the one that sent most men to their knees—and went for small talk. "So, are you a fan?"

He stared straight at her with sea-colored eyes. "No. I'm not a fan. I don't like how you use your voice."

Wow. That was blunt. As her smile fell away, Chloe tried not to let him see how it stung. "What's the problem? Is my rock music too loud for you, Grandpa?"

His expression took on a dangerous edge as he glanced at his sweating water glass. With a slow stroke, he traced a finger around the rim and a low hum reverberated across the table. "I'm a bit of a musician myself, you know."

"Yeah? What does a guy like you play? The skin flute?"

He didn't even smirk. "Let's just say, you're not the only one with a killer voice, Ms. Karras."

Now, how the hell did he know her last name? She never used it in promotions. "It's Chloe. Just *Chloe*. Like Shakira or Pink or Madonna. Am I supposed to know you, or something?"

"I'm Captain Alex Shore, a naval historian at the Academy"

Awesome. The only guys more uptight than military officers were academics. Was there anyone less appropriate for her to be attracted to? "Sorry, Captain Alex, but your name doesn't ring a bell."

Across the room, beneath the wild murals and brass accents, Chloe saw that Sophia had hooked up with her drummer. They were both now making out in the corner. Well, at least someone was going to get lucky tonight. Meanwhile, Captain Alex reached into his shirt pocket, pulled out two photos, and set them down on the table. "What about these sailors? Seeing them ring any bells?"

Chloe squinted, and made out the faces of two midshipmen in Navy coats and white caps. She recognized them, and not just from the news. "Aren't those the two dumb-asses who got drunk and decided to take a midnight swim? Way to take yourself out of the gene pool."

"I expected a little compassion from a former soldier like you, Ms. Karras."

With some female veterans, you could just look at them and tell. It was in the way they talked, the tilt of their shoulders, or a steely gaze. But Chloe had been so young when she served that she hadn't kept the military mannerisms and few people ever guessed. She must have looked as startled as she felt because he added, "I know all about you, Chloe. I know why your tour of duty was cut short. The whole decorated veteran thing may not go with your rebellious rock-diva image, but it's not hard to look you up."

She wasn't about to let him rattle her. Not after a set like tonight. She'd been a *goddess* on stage and she wasn't ready to come down off that high. "Am I supposed to be impressed that a guy your age knows how to use a search engine? Listen, I've mourned soldiers who gave their lives saving people, so I'm not about to shed any tears for these two." She shoved the photos back toward him. "Might nominate them for the Darwin Awards, though."

His expression soured and he folded his napkin in a very precise square. "Yet, I hear these boys were big fans of yours...."

Chloe shrugged and took a gulp of beer. Oak barrel stout. Cold, frothy and rich. She let it tingle all the way down before replying. Let him stew. He was pissing her off. "Yeah, well, they were also slobbering losers who didn't know how to keep their hands to themselves. The last time I saw them at a show, they started a fight and my drummer had to step in. They were pretty much another Navy sex scandal just waiting to happen. So why are you asking me about Tweedle-Dumb and Tweedle-Dumber?"

"Because they were my students," he said, pinning her in place with those cold, unnerving eyes. "And I know that you killed them."

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