

Dark Mermaids

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Chapter One

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Pulling on her leather coat, Sophia headed out the door towards trouble. On the corner of Jobenstrasse, a man played the violin, raw fingers edging out of dirty gloves, pressing down on each string as the cadence was lost in the fog and icy air. She paused wondering at his dexterity, the cold making the rise and fall of Strauss (or was it Lehár?) sound muted, the notes shivering with cold, hitting the air, falling, not dispersing, as they should. Sophia dropped small change into the violin case and kept her head down, winding through the gathering crowd, itching with the need to be touched. As she moved through the night, she allowed her emotions to loosen from tightly reined to unbridled. Felt her fingertips prickle with the desire to stroke soft skin.

She crossed the road and headed for the U-Bahn. Near the church two drunks were arguing, hands stabbing into the air, jagged and thin as paper, their words made little sense. One waved his half-empty bottle as the other one swore, turned, and opened his flies to piss weakly against the window of a darkened shop.

Inside the train, the carriages filled with groups of young people on their way to catch the night's magic before dawn broke. A few, already drunk, lurched from one compartment to another, fisting bottle and cans, they growled out old German songs about the forests and mountains. Sophia stared at the station signs and distant winding streets. The night sky hung fog-mantled over the city, and as they left the Hauptbahnhof, crossing the old border where the Wall just recently stood, the group roared, toasting one another with mouthfuls of supermarket Schnapps and an old woman, sitting near the doors, shifted further into the corner. The woman opened her bag to peer at something white with silky fur, and what *looked* like an inquisitive pink nose. One red faced Schnapps drinker coughed, prodded his mate, pointed to the animal, then deliberately spat on the floor. Sophia tensed, but with a squeal of brakes, the tram juddered to a halt at Friedrichstrasse. The woman zipped her bag shut, glared at the group (who began the bloody song again) and carefully placed her feet out onto the platform. Sophia followed, noting with a slight smile the woman's whispered "*Idioten,*" to the rabbit in the bag.

The pavements were so full she had to step into the street to avoid the crowds that swarmed this way and that, chatting as they picked up *Bratwurst*, *Sauerkraut*, and *Glühwein* from the forest of market stalls had sprung up during the last month, even though it was only November. No one wanted to be sensible, to stay at home and watch the news. No, they wanted to see history in the making and talk about their neighbour's new freedom. Sophia noticed the market traders had responded in their usual way by hiking up their prices to make a killing out of the flood of eager visitors that poured in from East Germany. The visitors stared at the shop names, statues and window displays as if they'd stepped through the door into a fantastical theme park.

Tonight, the crowds were welcome. Moving between them, Sophia kept her eyes firmly on the pavement, although every now and then, she checked the edge of the throng for green uniforms that could spell danger.

A large man trailing a small child collided with her and apologised profusely, his '*Entschuldigung*' pronounced with a throaty hum. Sophia couldn't place the accent, but remembered the sound like a faint echo of an earlier time. This worried her, made her sidestep down the next alley, pausing to catch breath and pull her hair back, wrapping the blue-black scarf tightly round her face. Near Rosmarinstrasse, she stopped and listened, stretching her neck to the sky, the distant boom of music was unmistakable and hot anticipation blushed across her stomach and down her legs as she shivered, then smiled. Yes. She could be anything she wanted, because no one knew. She'd left no trace; apart from coded notes hidden in the kitchen drawer, under the sharp knives – every address, the directions, times, and occasionally even names, carefully written. And of course, tonight's entry was an empty space, so even better, she could come back.

Across the narrow alley way, Sophia saw the entrance. A bouncer was leaning against the doorpost watching her. He had dragons tattooed up both arms. She frowned, looked closer: dragons and wolves. The man signalled that it was ok for her to enter, but Sophia paused. This guy could be a problem: the ones with tattoos usually were. They remembered things, things she'd rather they forgot – like her face. But her fingers ached and burned with the longing to touch someone. No, she couldn't go back, not now.

Head down, she dug out the entry fee. She was getting older, or staff were getting younger. Whichever. She wished the pair who were collecting tickets would stop wriggling long enough to take her money. They surfed closer. Bobbing up and down like a pair of young seals. One of them grabbed her hand; stamping it with a florescent star, then as if he'd done something spectacular his partner gave him a high five before the pair bounced along to

the next punter. Around the corner, she squeezed past a couple pushed up against the wall. Both were moaning, swapping saliva *and* skin, then finally she made her way into the inky-black hall; signalling for a beer to avoid shouting through the purple music.

A swarm of bodies vibrated on the dance floor. Some in perfect rhythm, others touching: hand on shoulder, mouth to ear, leaning close to shout a word or two, weaving one way then the other. Watching them she felt anticipation build as the music swelled, filling her mind, the beat strong enough to pulse through bone. Her blood hummed, heart thumping thick and slow as she drank in the thunderous sound.

She checked the edge of the crowd for dealers: noting the moment when one figure joined another, how they drifted to the fringe, by the doorway, just far enough from the bright lights. The briefest of touches was accompanied by a nod, then hand moving to mouth, oh so casually slipping the discreet pill between lips, as the buyer swallowed his choice of drug with water or beer. Sometimes the buyer would slip away to rooms that offered pocket mirrors, a glass table where powder could be chopped into lines and inhaled through notes rolled up into straws, but Sophia wasn't interested in white powder. Finding a clean surface here would be pretty much impossible, and in any case, the chemical burn inside her nose (so near the brain) was off-putting: especially the numbing bite that slid into deep passing nausea. But the hit was like magic: a buzzing, talking, fizzy-tingle that had walls bulging, the wind whispering crazy secrets to a moon that swung heavy and metallic in the sky.

No. tonight she'd buy the white dots that warmed her icy blood enough to dance and (more importantly) feel. Ecstasy. She nodded once as they glanced over towards her, ecstasy was a good name.

The dealers were remarkably similar: whippet-thin, pale skin, lank hair, and shark-like eyes. Some sported tastelessly expensive watches and knives. Knives that glinted at the very edge of her sightline, swiftly removed to become little more than a slight of the hand, one easily denied; a reminder that these men believed themselves invincible.

Sophia felt her bones grind with the need to loosen. She glided nearer the edge of the room, imagining her skin flake and peel to reveal new watery scales: wet and ready. She swapped money for one powdery circular fragment, bought a glass of cold vodka and, placing the pill on her tongue, drank it back and ordered another beer. Now the delicious wait, not long before the drug would turn the air milky and thick as a creamy orgasm, music blasting through loosening bone under her hot wet skin.

She watched. Drinking in the wild night with more vodka and beer until the floor became a sticky pool of sliding limbs, the night at its shuddering darkest. Then she danced,

weaving her mind to the sound, moving like silk on water. Now finally she could see everything and nothing. There were no more boxed-in limitations. No more what she could, and what she could *not*, just one long pounding wave of silver-green dancers, joining, moving closer.

From the edge of the seething crowd a slim-hipped stranger separated, his shadow thickening moment by moment until he became something defined and beautiful. A cruel mouth that smiled, blue eyes, hooded yet bold, these things parting him from the shoal and sweat – the thrum of elastic movement. As they danced, Sophia wondered how he would taste and licked the downy fur on the back of his neck, slicked with sweat, then bit down gently. He gasped, held on to her wrists, sliding close, melting, pushing up hard against her. It was always so easy – this glide from loose to electric, nothing more than movement and sensation, the unrecorded break to exit from the crowd, walk, take a car (this time a taxi), then rapture and the effortless beat of skin on skin.

Later, deep in sleep, she dreamed of thick water above and below, muscles that strained; pushing forward to watch white light ripple and snake across the pale blue and white tiles lining the bottom of the pool. As she raised her eyes above the levelled water, dark hair waxing back, she saw the edge and moaned: the noise inside her head like a pack of swarming wasps. Sour-sweet chlorine splashed underfoot as row after row of children paraded to clapping hands.

Then she was swimming as if life depended on speeding through the white water, concentrating, moving, hitting the pool wall to shoot under-and-through in a practised arch. She bit down hard against the need for breath – and glimpsed, just for a moment, barely an inch of time, the wavering figures that leaned over the pool edge, their skin and eyes boiling, fusing together as she gasped and swam deeper. Here it was silent apart from the distorted clicking in her ears and the distant splash of other swimmers. But now the water curdled, stringy – thick with fear, and she realised with a low pulse of dread: she couldn't breathe, couldn't see through the reddening weave. A wet thickness bumped, drifted past her shoulder, slid through her hand then drifted away. There was a white object in the distance, coming closer: a delicate thing, such a soft motion, riding through water it drifted then bumped– a child's limb, alabaster against the sticky redness.

Sophia woke moaning – she panicked and sat upright, pinpricks of white light darting

from left to right making her feel sick and dizzy. She'd bitten her lip, the blood tasted like copper and charcoal. Gagging, she slipped from the bed and fumbled her way into a strange bathroom. In the dark, she trickled water (not so much as to make a noise) into the sink and spat, using her hands to cup then rinse out the sour taste.

Her jaw, head, and shoulders were so tense they ached and burned. Still dizzy she tiptoed back into the bedroom, dreading the possibility she may have woken him, but the man was deep asleep. Sophia breathed, thanked god for small mercies, then gingerly fingered her way around the silent room. Slowly her mind filtered in the detail. The smell of washed curtains, the slimmest crack of light sneaking between the fabric to rest on a smart black desk and chair, and – oh thank god, there were her clothes, strewn across a second chair by the window.

As she tried to find her knickers, fumbling around at the bottom of the bed, she remembered how smooth his skin felt. He'd been young, very young, too young – talking about banks: his lifeblood based on numbers and money. At her age she should know better, worse still, she wasn't at all sure she'd liked him; a violent unsurprising lover who drove his body into hers with an intense silent, almost furious, focus. She'd drifted in a white-pill dream, imagined herself floating between icebergs, black as the moon, dead as the soft-limbed child of her dreams.

She pulled on her coat, glancing over to the bed with a ready excuse should he wake (people to see, things to do, *anything*) then crept to the door, carefully releasing the latch. Outside in the empty, dimly lit corridor Sophia leaned against the wall, mouth once again filled with blood, she limped the few steps across to the lift. No. Not the lift. That small box-like room, hanging from nothing but wire that could tighten and snap. She paused, walked quickly to the end of the corridor, pushing open the fire-exit and taking the stairs. There were three floors to go before she was out in the open. She spat into the gutter, retching out the horror of another bad dream. But now she could smell the bitter car fumes, almost taste the scent of fresh rain that drifted through the safe half-light of dawn. Coughing, Sophia straightened to look for a taxicab; and hailed the one turning the corner into the street. The taxi slowed and paused, the driver not sure; checking to see if she was fit for his newly cleaned cab. She threw back her shoulders and strode towards him; head high, a different person in a new skin.

Once home she paused and listened before opening the main door, but there was nothing, only the low hum of traffic from across the other side of the park mixing with the slow pale air of a Sunday morning: allowing her time. She stumbled up the stairs to the top

floor; unlocked the apartment, then double locked it from inside. Her clothes were disgusting, gluey with sweat, smoke, and worse – the milky-sweet smell of sex. She dumped them on the floor and shivered along to the bathroom, peering in the mirror and twisting to turn on the shower – opening her mouth wide to stare at a blistering row of tooth marks along the right side. Her tongue bumped across the ridges.

“Bloody hell” she muttered and rinsed carefully, brushing her teeth, watching as her grey-blue eyes accused her of another monumental cock up that ended with purple circles under her eyes and bruised lips, making her feel (and look dear God) like a vampire: a creature who lived inside shadow. The shadow she worked hard not to see.

Thank goodness, there was only one small bruise on her neck, nothing more. Minimal damage. Then, crouching low over the toilet, she realised there *was* something worse – it hurt to pee.

Sophia stepped into the shower, closed her eyes and turned her face to the hot water. Water that cleansed and calmed. She washed her hair, smelling the comforting normality of eucalyptus shampoo and wished she could feel safe. Lately her dreams had been filled with distorted images of milky faces that bulged and melted before she could see who they were, or what they wanted. Sometimes death, heavy with reason, bent down to her as she struggled to wake.

Oh no, her thighs were bruised on the inside. Sophia pressed against the yellowing flesh and winced. Enough. She’d throw away all her flimsy dance clothes and the address book, right *now*, or at least the moment she was dry. But the thought had been there many times, and now as before, it vaporised in the steam.

In the kitchen she made strong coffee, adding hot milk and lots of sugar, then drank the toffee’d mixture like it was nectar, watching dawn break over a November Berlin. No point thinking about anything, not the dreams, not the man, not even the things she refused to name – the waxy images of skin and bone. If she didn’t want to remember, she couldn’t risk sleeping and inviting her night demons back. So that left painting. She dragged the paint stand to the window, finding the light by angling it to face outward. Squeezed out green and blue oil paint as the canvas yawned, at one moment a blank screen, cold and forbidding, the next an invitation for her to dive in and paint the beautiful ocean.

Sophia layered blue then green, making the ocean roll and sway. There was no need for her to pause and wait for the rocks and caves to tell secrets; she knew every eddy and rush of the tide, each stone that ground to sand, even the small anemone that grew in the glinting rock pool. Now she painted the greyness of a distant whale, sliding the brush across the

canvass to outline the orange and white of a clown fish darting to safety inside the greening seaweed. Time crept from early morning to a rain-soaked afternoon, and finally, she stopped, dipped brushes in white spirit, and sighed. The weather mirrored her mood, rain falling all day; and anyway, she hadn't the energy to go for her daily run.

Her mouth was healing faster than her mind, and she rinsed again with mouthwash, heated some leftover vegetable soup, and drank a cup of thick sweet hot chocolate, a leftover of childhood comforts, and finally, when she believed she might sleep, Sophia limped to bed, leaving the light shining in the sitting room. Wrapped tight, eyes closed; she prayed *please, just let me sleep.*

Monday dawn arrived, fuzzy-edged and bad-tempered, covering the city with a fog so thick that buildings slid in and out of focus. Sophia opened her eyes moments before the alarm began its annoying ring. She turned it to off and lay dozing in the warmth of the cosy bed, listening to the rain tap against her bedroom window. Wonderful. She'd actually slept well; felt energised and alive: something that always happened *after*. No, best not to think about that, but even as she pushed the images away, they formed and took shape. Six months ago, was that all? She thought it might even be less. There had been a week of intense loneliness: which grew to a month. The world seeming so distant – as though it existed beyond a wall of glue, or melted wax, keeping her isolated and separate. People spoke although she didn't really hear when they asked

“Sophia, are you all right”? Because she wasn't. Under her feet, the summer earth was cracking, her body slowly falling towards a darkness that would suck blood from bone. Sophia screwed up her eyes and shoved her face in the pillow. Her reaction had been desperate and typical. She'd found a new darkened hall and danced. The music fluid as honey, high on speed, daring the night shadows to catch her, never stopping until the boy's skin slid into hers. Afterwards sleep had claimed her, keeping her until late in the morning. The problem was that he'd been a boy – really no more than a *child*. He woke her, offered her a drink – his sweet young voice eager and obviously proud to supply his latest (please not *first*) conquest with coffee. She'd managed to pretend to drink as he chattered about what they could do with *their* Sunday. She didn't talk, just attempted a nod, and he (thank god) didn't expect a reply. When he went to shower, she scrambled, sweating with panic, to haul on any clothes she could find. Grabbing keys, coat, and money to dash out the front door and arrive home shaking. But this time it didn't end. He *phoned* that afternoon, concerned even a little angry, the message (she never answered the phone if the caller was unknown) stating he wanted. No, that was wrong. He *expected* to see her again – for an explanation at the very

least.

Sophia thumped her hand against the cushion – it should have been her head. This was not how a police officer behaved, but the sneaky little bastard had got under her skin and scared her. She pushed the bedclothes to one side. She'd called her Hajo on his *home* number, something she'd never done, would never ever do – if she hadn't been so stupid and panicked. And then she'd lied, told her boss (of all people) that she was getting harassment calls, when really it was just some stupid kid. She'd stuttered like a complete idiot that she was frightened the caller might hurt her. But the harm was all her own doing. Hajo told her to shut up, calm down, find a paper bag, and breathe into it. Then he hung up, leaving it to the operator to ring later saying that her number would be changed the next day.

Sophia got out of bed and peered suspiciously at her thighs, the bruises had faded but her mouth still hurt. That Monday morning Hajo had been completely normal. Brusque, rude and impatient, growling orders and insults at anyone who dared to query their caseload, his complete lack of concern had been immensely comforting.

Her bedroom was quiet, the rush of early morning traffic barely registering. The side lamp threw a gentle light across the bed and white rug. In her chest of drawers, all contents were precisely organised. The top drawer to the right held white bras folded in quiet contemplation next to white pants and brown socks. The left drawer was filled with her other underwear. Satin and chiffon, Basque with ruched lace, ribbons and ties, delicate black suspenders; stuff that just wouldn't fold – her secret life in black and purple.

In the closet, yellow shirts hung next to brown trousers, keeping company with the solitary spare police jacket. Once her dance clothes were washed they would hang alone in a dark corner of the closet, or she'd buy a replacement. Sophia didn't like to remember how many times the gossamer t-shirt and sheer leggings had ended up in the bin on the absolute promise she'd never go again. On the floor lay paint clothing, folded of course. Her running clothes lived in the bottom drawer or in the washer-dryer in the basement.

Sophia walked to the kitchen and filled the percolator (a *great* buy last month) with ground coffee. Heading for the bathroom, she tripped over the small pile of filthy clothing from the night before. How could she have left it there, festering and smelling, growing *bacteria*? Pulling on plastic gloves, she cleaned up, dumping the clothing into a tightly sealed bag, then showered fast, towelling hair, dragging a brush, then comb through until each strand was pulled into a neat, very tight, bun. She never wore make-up: wanting to be whatever she was, although quite often she wasn't at all sure *what*.

A pale face stared out from the mirror. Blue-grey eyes holding her with their fierce

gaze: those eyes were nothing like her. Two skins, she decided, pulling on the uniform daffodil shirt, two skins that rubbed (or chafed) occasionally moving as one when she was running, or frightened or *that*. Well, the darkness and dancing were gone, washed away with a good night's sleep, and now all the detail was safely recorded in the small book in the kitchen drawer - *and there it would bloody well stay*.

Her doorbell rang, demandingly shrill and she moved to the apartment door, unlocked it and leaned reluctantly out over the railing. Here we go. *Every* morning. There stood Frau Weiner on guard while the postman shoved letters into each separate tray. Frau Weiner would make *sure* nothing went into the wrong box, then she'd consider it her moral duty to ring everyone's doorbell.

"A letter for you, Frau Künstler – hand-written" she called as Sophia lifted a hand in a half wave before retreating and slamming the door. *Bloody letters*. Already there were three of the damn things making up a small pile that sat unread on the kitchen table. Her address – 14 Tiergartenstrasse – written in a slanted messy hand, a hand she was absolutely not going to remember. Sophia drank her coffee, thick and sweet as condensed milk, waking up quickly as the early grey light blinked over the city, casting a near silver-glow on The Victory Column in Tiergarten Park. She glanced at the clock on the kitchen wall. Hell. It was already past six-thirty, and if she wasn't out the door by quarter to seven she'd be late.

Shrugging on the green jacket, Sophia hugged the fabric tight, loving the safety of the uniform: *one of many*, not alone. The beige trousers were not flattering; lumpy and thick, they hid her slim figure well, as did her hat – the insignia of Police Protection Squad looked the same as it had for her twelve-year service.

As she did every morning, she touched her medals that hung by the door. They clinked, a hollow sound against the wall – useless trinkets from a lifetime ago. Grabbing the bag of washing, she ran downstairs, unlocked the mailbox, shoving the latest envelope violently to the back. Look at it later? Probably not.

In the basement, she threw the bag on top of her lonely washing machine; then turned and unlocked the door through to the garage. Sometimes she ran to work. Loving the feel of hard concrete under her feet she watched the world blinked itself awake: but not today, she was already late, so she'd take the car. There was a broken bike, mattress, and chair along with three plastic bags in the furthest corner, stinking of piss. This time the note she stuck on the resident's board wouldn't be so damn polite. Typical that no one had even noticed. The rubbish would have been there all weekend, and with it came drunks and homeless.

"Lazy bastards," she grunted, unlocking the car door, wincing as the ignition whined and

caught, spewing blue smoke out into the enclosed space. Keeping the windows shut she drove out onto the street.

It began raining heavily as she pulled out onto Kantstrasse, and Sophia made her way toward the Orangerie Pavilion, turning left into Charlottenburg police headquarters. What used to be the front garden of a grand house was now a muddy over-full car park. She reversed out and turned, driving furiously down towards Mollwitzstrasse, managing to *squeeze* into a narrow space opposite the bakery. *Saltzbrötchen*? Yum, the thought of them made her mouth water. *Saltzbrötchen* versus getting to work on time? She jogged across to the bakery. What the hell – she bought two, categorically, and *officially*, late again.

Monday briefing had started as she slipped behind her desk, ignoring Hajo's glare, picking up her mail and briefly noticing the large envelope with her name written in large capital letters across the front. More people writing to her when they could just leave her alone. Knut scowled across at her looking as fed up as a two-years-before-retirement man could. He'd practised complaining for decades and now had the art honed to perfection. Last week it had been the bloody East Germans swarming into the city; taking away resources he considered stretched to breaking point. Then (she'd had to hide a laugh), to cap it all he'd been asked to take on an East German police officer for *training*. Sophia liked to do extra work. Better to stay busy, focussed on the job, keeping well away from the dark pull of music and young strangers. So she volunteered for overtime during weekends and holidays, but to have to train an Ossi officer?

She listened with half an ear, trying to eat her salted roll under the desk like a school girl. The crumbs went everywhere. Then she sat up as Hajo outlined their week's work. He'd listed Grüner as her partner for desk duty. Ernst Grüner was an arsehole. In true form he grinned at her, lifted his middle finger, wiggling it in an exaggerated fashion while the others stood up, scraping their chairs back, glad to be out, glad to be going. The day couldn't get any worse. Sophia kicked the table leg and caught Hajo's eye. She smiled straight at him, showing her teeth, her face bright and angry, and was startled when he grinned back. He looked vibrant and amused, his face creasing, grey eyes flecked with silver – seeing everything. Abruptly he straightened, coughed, then dumped a pile of paperwork in front of her.

"Parking fines and tax," he said.

Immature? Yes, without a doubt, but as Sophia worked through the pile of fines and receipts, she thought of a hundred ways to kill Ernst. She imagined using him as a speed bump, reversing to make *quite* sure, leaving him in a very small dark place, pushing him hard into the path of a speeding car, or just shooting him. The police station felt as if the walls

were closing in. Phones were ringing in time with the heavy tread of boots on the floor. Doors opened then slammed – and here she was having to typing out last month's summons for *parking* fines and taxes. Neck sore, head beginning to throb she tried (inconspicuously) to stretch to the right, then left. Ernst eye's lit up, his mouth opened and Sophia deliberately turned her back, vowing in the future to hand out fines only when she absolutely had to. She pulled the envelope from under the pile of still-to-be-processed mail and sighed. The handwriting was exactly the same as on the post at home. Unwanted mail. She prodded it, thought about throwing the thing in the bin, then bent the envelope in half, but it was too thick to fit in her pocket so she shoved it back to the bottom of the pile, she'd deal with it later.

Hajo was in his office ranting down the phone. She felt a flutter of sympathy for the victim, then remembered how his eyes had warmed when he grinned. Something had flared up between them. Unsettling. Weird. The bastard had deliberately made her angry. She wasn't at school anymore and didn't need to be ordered to sit at a stupid bloody desk as a warning not to be late again. Her best work was outside; either in the squad car or on foot and her typing was embarrassingly slow; something that gave Ernst intense pleasure. On top of that he was nearly at the end of his list. So any moment now the little shit would turn around and ask her why she was not at the end of hers?