



## CHAPTER ONE



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Berlin 1990

Pulling on her leather coat, Sophia strode along Bellevuestrasse, jumping on the U-Bahn crammed with fresh tourists ready for a weekend of the city's particular magic. A group of drinkers lurched from one compartment to another, waving bottles and cans and growling out old songs about never-ending forests and mountains. Folding her long legs under the icy metal seat, Sophia burrowed into the worn coat, tucked her hair under the collar and thought about sex, as the night sky hung fog-mantled over the city and station signs and distant winding streets blurred.

Leaving Potsdamer Platz, they crossed the border where the Wall had just recently stood. The group roared, toasting one another with mouthfuls of supermarket *Schnapps*. An old woman, in matching nettle-green coat and handbag, sank further into her corner. She opened the bag just a crack. A flash of white. A pink nose nudged, then stained teeth chewed at the leather rim. One of the men prodded his mate. Pointed. The pair closed in. The woman zipped her bag shut as the drinker's mate grinned and spat. His phlegm landed, a gelid mound, between Sophia and the

door as, with a squeal of brakes, the U-Bahn juddered to a halt at Friedrichstrasse. The woman stepped onto the platform as the group yodelled a discordant chorus. Sophia followed, smiling as the woman whispered '*Idioten*' to the rabbit in the bag.

The pavements were so full she had to dodge into the street to avoid the swarm. Talking, shouting, touching and laughing. Eating *Bratwurst* with *Sauerkraut*, the city folk drank *Glühwein* from a forest of market stalls that had sprung up along Unter den Linden even though it was only November. Why couldn't they stay at home and watch the news? They wanted, she supposed, to talk about their neighbours' new freedom. To laugh and stare. The market traders responded by hiking up prices. It was all too easy to encourage the flood of visitors that poured in from East Germany to traipse across the old border, then spend what little money they had.

There they were: pointing at the former checkpoint. Staring at the newly created window displays, forming orderly queues at the entrance, until someone took pity and told them *to open the door and go in*. Every face was fixed in an expression of wonder, as if they'd stepped through the door into a Disney theme park full of brand new fridges and American jeans.

Tonight though, 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 guy trailing a wailing child collided with her and apologised profusely, his *Entschuldigung* pronounced

## Dark Mermaids

with a throaty hum. What was that accent? Uneasy, she sidestepped 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 again – stretching her neck to the sky: the distant boom of music was unmistakable. Heat tingled in her belly and between her legs.

There was the entrance, but a bouncer was leaning against the doorpost watching. She frowned and looked away; there'd been no mention of bouncers in the magazine flyer. Disappointment made her sour and grey. This guy could be a problem: he would remember things like her face. Her fingers burned with such longing that, almost moving against her will, she turned and, head down, dug out the entry fee. Inside the door, she handed over her worn leather coat; grabbed the numbered ticket and squeezed past a couple straining up against the wall. Both were moaning, swapping saliva and skin. The tight fist inside her stomach uncurled, opened, making her sigh as she made her way into the inky-black hall, signalling for a beer to avoid yelling through the booming 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, swirling the other. Watching them she felt her body swell to a beat strong enough to pulse through bone. What would they see if they looked? A thin unyielding face or the dark-haired beauty Hajo had said she was? Long-limbed, supple with muscled arms and swimmer's legs. On a good day her eyes were deep blue, like a wolf – flecked with grey.