

Chapter One

I wake up in the sea.

The icy salt water sucks me under, and no matter how hard I claw for the surface, it remains just out of reach. Even as part of my body responds like a flower seeking the sun, soaking up the energy that only the ocean can bring, the rest of me screams for air that I no longer have access to.

A mermaid with no gills.

A mermaid who can drown.

Down and down I go, the pressure building against this weak body. I open my mouth, a desperate string of bubbles escaping. The last of my air.

It isn't supposed to end like this. I'm not supposed to have the thing I love most in this broken world turned against me—morphed into the weapon I have no way to fight. Will my sisters sense my death? Will they wonder what happened to me?

Or will they just be relieved that it's over?

I open my eyes against the pressing darkness. There, in front of me, is a bit of shadow deeper, darker than the inky blackness around it.

I'm not alone.

Something slides against my skin, identifiable even through the soul-deep cold of the water. Several somethings. They wrap around me again and again, covering my ankles, wind up my legs, around my hips, over my chest. Until that living noose tightens around my neck.

Soon, pretty.

The voice is darkness personified. Cold and knowing and more powerful than I'll ever be.

I won't let him have me. Death by drowning might be a disgrace, but it's cleaner. *I will not let him take me.* I open my mouth and inhale the sea.

The beach is just as cold as the ocean. More so, with the wind whipping at my exposed skin. I lay there, half submerged by the incoming tide, and try to make sense of my new reality.

I'm alive.

I didn't drown.

I don't even know how I got in the water to begin with.

None of that matters right now. Without access to the full breadth of my powers, I'm just as liable to freeze to death as I am to drown. This new reality is shit. It takes everything I have to push myself onto my hands and knees and climb to my feet.

The world sways around me, or maybe it's me swaying. I don't know anymore. The only thing that matters is putting as much distance between my battered body and the instrument of pain at my back. One foot in front of the other. Rinse, repeat.

The lights of Trinidad wink on the other side of the beach. It might share its name with the island in the Caribbean, but Northern California couldn't be more different. This Trinidad was far more fishing town than tropical paradise. Safety, but also a different kind of danger. The people there have no idea that the supernatural exists in this world—or that their world is just one of millions that are home to countless species, all a quick portal jump away.

Or it would be a quick portal jump if I was still capable of making portals.

I touch the hollow of my throat, my finger tracing the curve there were my necklace used to rest. Taking it shouldn't have been enough to take the magic that ran through my veins, but combined with a spell that tied the two together...

No use thinking about it. I can't go back and change the past any more than I can figure out how to change the trampled future before me. The only ones who could help me were the very sisters I couldn't bear to admit the truth to. Better that they keep believing everything is fine, that I'm pursuing my own interests like the rest.

My house sits just outside of town, straddling the line between beach and forest. When I moved in, I wanted to be as far from the Pacific as I could manage, but reality isn't that simple. The ocean calls to me. Going farther inland diminishes what little connection I maintain with my essence. It empties me out and leaves me as something even less than human.

Leagues less than the merfolk I actually am.

Or at least the one I used to be.

My door hangs open, creaking slightly in the breeze coming off the water. Even though I expected as much, I still curse under my breath. Sleepwalking again. It doesn't seem to matter what precautions I take. Every night under the new moon, I wake in the water. It used to be that the first touch of ocean to my bare feet would jar me back to reality and undo whatever spell wrapped around my sleeping form. But in the last few months, things have become increasingly dire.

Cumulating tonight in my almost-drowning.

No. No almost about it. I *did* drown.

My chest hurts as if I've been rammed by a pod of dolphins and each breath rattles with liquid still residing in my lungs. I most definitely drowned. Though I normally don't lock my

door, I pause and flip the flimsy deadbolt. There are hours left until dawn, and even if I won't be sleeping, putting every barrier I can between myself and the beach makes me feel the tiniest bit better.

It's only when I pull my soaked oversized T-shirt over my head that the memories of being under roll through me. The shirt hits the ground with a wet plop and I abandon my plan to use the shower to coax some warmth back into my limbs. Water is a no-go. I don't *think* it will call up whatever came to visit me in the dark, but because I can't be sure, I climb into my bed and pull my pile of blankets around myself.

No matter how mild the Northern California winter is—or the summer for that matter—warmth escapes me. It never used to. Once upon a time, I could brave untold depths without so much as catching a chill...

I growl and roll over, pulling the blankets over my head. What is *wrong* with me? It's been years. I might not be living my best life, but I haven't rolled over and let sorrow drag me under yet. If there's one rule I live by now, it's not to spend time lamenting what I lost.

I lost it.

End of story.

But as I huddle beneath the covers and wait for warmth that will never arrive, I hear the voice again. It slithers through my memories, tainting everything it touches.

Soon, pretty.

Every muscle winds tighter and tighter, my body readying itself to spring into motion even though my mind hasn't made the decision to move yet. Even *thinking* about that voice has me wanting to flee to high ground. Somewhere the sea can't touch, because make no mistake—that voice calls from the sea. One of the monsters of the deep, though they come in so many shapes

and sizes and specialties, it's anyone's guess what his flavor of awful is. My sister Amae would know, but I haven't spoken to Amae in two long years and I can't exactly call her up now to keep me company because I slept-walked into the ocean, mostly drowned, and hallucinated a nightmare.

I lay there as the minutes tick by and light steals across the sky visible through my bedroom window. With each paler shade of blue the sky reveals, I can breathe a little easier. Bad things can and will happen in the day, but at least I won't be wandering into the ocean without anyone to stop me.

Not that I *have* anyone. I'm the very essence of a loner, cut off from everyone who might give a shit about me. The worst part is that I have no one to blame but myself.

With a growl, I stagger out of bed and go through the motions of getting ready for the day. Shower, clean clothes, a mug of coffee nearly as big as my head. Anything to make my day a little less hellish.

I trudge down the gravel path to the street and walk parallel to the beach toward town. Trinidad isn't anywhere near as large as Eureka to the south, but it sees more than its fair share of tourists by virtue of squatting astride the 101 and having plenty of beach to ogle. Tourists like to stop here to stretch their legs and wander through town, to soak up the local atmosphere, or whatever they tell themselves as they ogle anything and everything.

One of those things being my bookstore.

My sisters would laugh their asses off if they saw me now—one of the merfolk who bought a used bookstore and spends her day surrounded by dusty paper and four thick walls that almost, *almost*, smother the distant sound of the tide's endless dance between earth and moon. What can I say? I play against type.

The salt air has long since caused the wood of the front door to swell and bloat, meaning each morning I have to wrestle it into submission. The wind whips down the street, yanking my blond hair out of its haphazard bun and I curse a blue streak. I can taste salt and electricity on the air, the combination ripe with possibility. Once upon a time, I would have lived for what it portends, but now I just curse harder because it means I might as well have stayed home.

“Storm’s coming.”

I jump, the motion yanking the front door open and nearly sending me flying. It gives me a chance to paste a polite smile on my face before I turn to face my neighbor Penelope Richards. Even after the years I’ve spent in this world, I’m still terrible at guessing human ages. She could be anywhere from sixty to ninety, her gray hair a nimbus around her head and the body beneath her floral dress so thin, it’s a wonder the wind doesn’t pick her up and carry her down the street. Another gust chooses that moment to slam into us, and I reluctantly let go of the bookstore’s door. She’s been nothing but kind to me, despite my general lack of social skills and I can’t very well let her get hurt just because I don’t feel like chatting. “Pen, why don’t you come in for some tea?” Anything to get her out of the weather for a little bit—and save me the chore of having to walk her home before I open shop.

“If you’re sure it won’t be an imposition.” She’s already moving, ducking into the open doorway with a glowering look at the clouds twisting together overhead. “It’s going to be a nasty one, mark my words.”

“I know.” I can feel the pending violence licking against my skin. Despite mostly mild winters in Northern California, the occasional winter storm still rolls through and reminds us mortals that our lives mean less than nothing in the grand scheme of the universe. I wrestle the

door shut and shove my hair out of my face. “You stay out of the weather today, Pen. It’s not going to be something to mess around with.”

She tsks at me, the sound full of fondness. “I know you think I’m just an old biddy who needs taking care of, Lorelei, but I’ve been weathering these storms since I was younger than you.” She squeezes my arm. “But I appreciate you thinking of me. That grandson of mine is going to come collect me before too long.”

The grandson in question probably doesn’t even realize she’s missing. Pen likes to give him the slip just to prove she still can, though most days she spends with her group of lady friends, sunning themselves on one of the benches lining the main thoroughfare and gossiping about things that happened decades ago. She doesn’t like to admit it, but she can’t get around as well as she used to.

No point in commenting on that, though. She’s here and, for the time being, she’s safe. I pause to flick on the Open sign, the red neon brighter than it should be at this time of day. Another glance at the gathering clouds and I follow Pen deeper into the bookstore.

As much as I bought this place in some strange sort of penance, I’ve grown to love it. The shelves perpetually lean in odd directions, forcing people walking the few aisles to lean with them, and though I keep them mostly organized by genre, I’ve started and stopped a massive reorganization no less than half a dozen times. The result is...eclectic. People find what they’re looking for when they wander in, though, and that’s all that matters.

I have a tiny bar situated behind the counter, though the only thing it holds is an electric kettle and a glass case with a variety of tea. Pen’s hobby seems to be ensuring that I’m not left alone for too long—and that I could drown in all the tea provided.

The thought of drowning has the smile fading from my lips. I almost forgot, just for a little bit, about what happened in the dark of the new moon.