

LETHAL WATERS

CHAPTER ONE

The concrete piers of the Burrard Street Bridge rose up from the False Creek seabed, its steel girders looming eighty feet overhead. My kayak felt inconsequential by comparison. I rested my paddle across the hull and drifted forward into the bridge's shadow. A weak sun struggled behind the overcast sky.

My breath condensed in white puffs. I loved these crisp, cool mornings alone on the water. It was peaceful. Out here, life seemed simple, uncomplicated. Almost what I imagined normal felt like. A light breeze stirred the chilly air. The kayak rocked gently, its yellow hull reflected in the ripples that lapped quietly against it. I gazed up toward the underside of the bridge deck, where car tires thumped over expansion joints.

In the distance, the rumble of outboard motors drew my attention. Time to get a move on. I tugged my cap down over my ears and blew a warm breath into cupped hands. The dry suit that kept my body warm did nothing for my head or my hands. The temperature hovered around five Celsius and the cold was finally getting to me.

I gripped my paddle and continued seaward, cautious of the potential danger from the boats whose motors were growing louder as they approached from behind. Six strokes later, almost out of the bridge's shadow, the tandem outboards roared, drowning out all other sound. I darted a wide-eyed glance behind and then hunched my shoulders and braced for the inevitable wake that would follow.

The marine speed limit in False Creek is five knots or dead slow. They had the "dead" part right. They raced by on either side of me with their throttles wide open. I barely got a glimpse of them before I felt the powerful effect of their wake. My kayak rolled dangerously when the first wave hit broadside, but it was the second wave that swamped me. It struck from the opposite direction and lifted the hull, dumping me into the frigid water.

I flailed in the dark, trapped upside down in the seat of my cockpit, groping for the tether to my lost paddle. I'd practiced the Eskimo roll that would right me dozens of times, but all of those self-induced rolls hadn't prepared me for the real thing. It wasn't the sting of salt water in my eyes, or the frosty temperature of a February ocean that made holding my breath difficult—it was the clear memory of drowning. My drowning.

It's not something you ever forget: the desperation that compels you to inhale water into your lungs, the way the weight of that water sinks you more effectively than any anchor. It's the disquieting euphoria of finally letting go. The panic that should have compelled me to jettison instead froze me in place. A memory flashed by at the watery sight of my outstretched arm. Last summer that same arm reached for a surface that I could see but couldn't reach.

Precious seconds ticked by.

I felt my cap lift away in the current. It was enough to shake me from the nightmare. Latent terror ignited and galvanized me into action. I yanked on the paddle's tether and re-established my grip. In one adrenalin-fed stroke, I

swept my paddle in a powerful arc and rode the momentum to the surface. The instant my face cleared the water into a halo of light, I heaved a ragged breath then coughed and choked in another gulp of air.

"I've got you," a man's voice called as his red kayak bumped against my hull. A dark beanie covered his head. I pressed my knuckles against my eyes to clear the stinging water. My rescuer steadied the kayak while I caught my breath.

"Thank you," I sputtered. The mother of all ice-cream headaches stabbed across my forehead. As I recovered, I took in the man who'd come to my rescue. I put him in his late twenties. A day's stubble covered cheeks flushed red with the cold. He had the shoulders of a weightlifter and a firm grip on the cleat behind my cockpit. He'd laced his paddle under the bungee cording to steady me.

"That was a lot easier to do in waist-deep water," I rasped, my throat burning. No wonder the instructor had insisted we repeat the Eskimo roll exercise each time we went out. She'd said I'd likely never use it. Yeah.

"You probably shouldn't have been out here alone. You did well, considering." He offered a conciliatory smile.

My natural impulse should have been to claw my way out of the cockpit. "I probably should've done a wet exit." I'd practiced those, too, and would struggle back into the kayak to pump it out. At least the neoprene spray skirt had kept most of the water out of the kayak.

"I saw you go under. Luckily, I was just across the channel."

"Thank you." I glanced around for his partner but was grateful enough for his help to not mention the fact that I didn't find one. A wave rocked our hulls, and he held us steady.

"We need to report those yahoos," he said with contempt. "They're going to get someone killed out here."

"You know who they are?"

"No, but I know where they rented those boats. Where're ya headed?"

"Back to my car. I launched at Kitsilano, but now I think I'd better find somewhere to warm up first." This outing was supposed to help me build the upper-body strength my new kayaking hobby demanded. Perhaps I'd been too ambitious.

"I know a place. Do you know Scuppers?"

"No. Where is it?"

"Not far. It's where I was headed. Want to follow me?"

"Yeah, thanks." I reached over to offer my hand. "Emelynn Taylor."

"Owen Cooper," he said, jutting out his hand to take mine in a fierce grip. "Nice to meet you, Emelynn." He offered a confident smile that reached up and crinkled the corners of his dark brown eyes.

Owen disentangled his paddle from the bungee webbing and swung around. "This way," he said, paddling landward back under the Burrard Street Bridge. Within minutes we'd slipped under the grey steel and concrete of the Granville Street Bridge. We passed a small marina with swaying sailboats and pulled alongside a dock parallel to the rip-rap shore of Granville Island.

"You can tie up there," Owen said, pointing to the end of the slim dock. He continued ahead while I secured my kayak. I unfolded myself from the cockpit and climbed onto the dock. My limbs shook from the effort, or maybe it was from the receding adrenalin. Wet hair didn't help. I needed to get warm. With stiff shoulders, I pulled my dry bag from the rear hatch.

I shivered as I clutched the bag to my chest and scanned the docks for anyone out of place. Constant vigilance was a heavy weight I'd gladly shed if I could. I walked to the far end of the dock to find Owen. I was halfway up the ramp when I spotted him and stopped short to stare like an ill-mannered child. Owen was operating an electric winch,

which had just pulled him from his kayak and deposited him in a wheelchair at the top of the ramp.

He looked over and waved me up. I snapped my mouth closed and checked my footwear. I didn't know the man, but I could have sworn I saw him grin. I swallowed my embarrassment and continued up the ramp, watching him unhook the harness apparatus.

"Sorry for staring. You caught me by surprise," I said.

"I usually do." His grin widened into a smile. "Your reaction was stellar. Maybe one of the best. I wish I had it on film."

"Guess I'm fortunate you didn't have a camera," I said, feeling the heat of a blush warm my face. "It was rude. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It's cheap entertainment for those of us easily amused. Come on; let's get warm."

He spun his chair with precision and set it rolling across the blacktop with one push of his powerful arms. The chair had slanted wheels and a short back, similar to the type athletes use. We crossed a wide sidewalk and passed Scuppers' deserted outdoor deck. A brass porthole adorned the front door. Owen punched the plate for the automatic door opener, and I had another awkward moment: should I go ahead of him, or not? What was the proper etiquette? Happily, when the door opened, he swept his arm ahead of him, answering my question.

The warmth inside was heavenly, but it only accentuated the chill of icy water dripping down my scalp. "What can I get you, Owen?" the hostess asked. Her long brown hair was pulled into a ponytail high on the back of her head.

"Irish coffee for me, Caitlin. What about you, Emelynn?" He turned to me with an arched brow and lopsided grin that said an alcohol-free beverage would be unacceptable.

"Irish coffee sounds good."

“Ah, good answer,” he said, and once again finessed his chair into a tight turn. “Caitlin, be a doll and turn the fireplace on, would you? We need to dry out.”

“Sure will. The coffee’s fresh. I’ll be right over with your drinks.”

“Thanks,” Owen said, pointing his wheelchair toward the big stone fireplace on the far side of the room. Caitlin pointed a remote control in the direction of the hearth, and flames leapt to life along the ceramic logs behind a black mesh screen.

I trailed behind Owen through the mostly empty restaurant; it was too early for the lunch crowd. Too early for an Irish coffee, too, but I had a good excuse.

I dropped my bag on a chair near the fireplace. “Sounds as if you’ve been here a time or two,” I said, rooting through my bag in search of a towel.

“My brother owns the place,” Owen said, stripping out of his jacket. Everything about him spoke to his confidence, from the easy banter with the hostess to his quick smile to his decisive physical movements.

“That’s handy.” I blotted the worst of the dripping water from my hair. I unzipped my suit and peeled it off, grateful for the absence of customers, and hung it on the coat rack beside the fireplace. Underneath, I wore thermal tights and a long-sleeved shirt. In the dry bag I kept a fleece, which I pulled on and snuggled into. Much better, I thought, rubbing my hands together in front of the flames in an attempt to jump-start the warming.

Owen pulled off his beanie and I got my first good look at him. He had a broad chest, heavily muscled arms and a seriously bad case of hat-head. He followed my upward gaze and tried to smooth the tangled mess of brown hair. His smile revealed perfectly white teeth.

“Here you go,” Caitlin said, setting our drinks down. “Can I get you anything else?”

“Not for me, thanks. Emelynn?”

"No, this is great. Thank you."

"All right. Shout if you change your mind." Caitlin turned with a flip of her ponytail and called over her shoulder, "I'm putting this on your tab, O."

"You don't have to pay for me," I said.

"Ignore her," Owen said, and then raised his voice to call after her, "She's teasing." He had a thick tracheotomy scar at the base of his throat. How had he ended up in a wheelchair?

"Not teasing," Caitlin replied with a giggle, and sashayed back to the bar.

"Do you live around here?" I asked, smiling at their antics.

"Not far. Over in English Bay. How about you?"

"I've got a place out by UBC."

"Student?" he asked, twisting his mug in rhythmic circles. He wore a heavy gold signet ring on the pinky of his right hand.

"No, I just live out there."

"Are you from here?"

"BC?" I asked, and he nodded. "Yeah. South of here. Summerset." My old hometown was a thirty-minute drive away. I still owned property there, where our family's old Arts and Crafts-style cottage used to be. *Used to be*. A man, whose memory still haunted me, set fire to it last year. I was inside it at the time. I closed my eyes against the memory.

"Still cold?" Owen asked.

I shook off the recollection and forced a weak smile. "A little." I took a sip of the Irish coffee. "This is helping."

"Summerset's nice. What brought you into Vancouver? Work?"

It usually took longer for the dreaded but inevitable *work* question to come up.

"I'm between jobs." If he pressed, I'd mention the bookkeeping I'd done for the Rumble sisters' bookstores. I'd learned long ago that if I had to skirt the truth then

keeping as close to it as possible made the lie easier to remember. Besides, it wasn't entirely untrue. I was between jobs. Hopefully there would be another one; it just wouldn't be anything I could talk about. I changed the subject.

"You said you knew where those people rented their boats."

"Yeah, they're Oscar's boats. He operates out of the far end of False Creek. I'll talk to him."

"Thanks." I wanted the names of the boats' drivers, but if they'd targeted me intentionally, they wouldn't have used their real names.

I steered our discussion to kayaking, something I didn't have to lie about. Owen eagerly shared his experiences. His ingenuity in designing the winch apparatus and adapting his kayak was impressive. And kayaking was just one of the sports he enjoyed. He also raced wheelchairs and rock climbed. Those activities would have been a challenge for anyone. The fact that he took them up in a wheelchair said a lot about the man's determination.

"It was a skiing accident that put me in the chair."

"I'm sorry."

He dismissed my comment with a wave of his arm. "It was a long time ago. Most people I meet are curious; they're just too polite to ask."

"Polite is infinitely better than staring with their mouths open," I said, recalling my behaviour on the ramp.

"Polite's overrated." He drained his mug. "If you let it, the chair will run your life and stop conversation dead. I try to pre-empt that nonsense."

The muffled ring of my phone sent me searching through the dry bag again with apologies. I checked the call display. "I'm sorry, Owen. I've got to take this." I scooted out of my seat. Owen nodded.

"Just a minute, Avery," I said, making my way outside. "What's up?" I asked, bracing against the cool air. Avery

Coulter was my doctor, but he was also a very good friend and the closest thing I had to a father.

“How quickly can you get over to Vancouver General Hospital?”

At the mention of VGH, a shock ran through me. “What’s happened?”

“It’s Sydney. Where are you?”

“I’m on Granville Island. I can be there in twenty minutes. Is she hurt?” Sydney Davenport was one of us.

“Physically, no. But she needs a friend and you’re the closest. I’ll meet you in Emerg. Twenty minutes?”

“Okay.” I hung up and dialled Black Top Cabs. When I told them it was an emergency, they promised to send a car right away.

“Something wrong?” Owen asked as I scurried back to our table and began gathering my belongings.

“Sorry to rush off, but I need to go. Who can I talk to about storing my kayak for a day or two?”

“I’ll look after it for you. Here,” he said, fishing a business card out of his wallet. “Call me when you’re ready to collect it.”

I took the card, on which was printed, *Owen Cooper, Owner*. I pinched my brow and read, “*Goat Trail Indoor Climbing Gym?*”

He shrugged. “There’s always a goat trail to hike before you reach the climb.”

I smiled at his explanation and tucked the card into my bag. “I owe you one, Owen. Thank you.” I shook his hand and rushed outside to my waiting cab.