

# 1

**P**ORT ANGELES, WASHINGTON. 1926

Laurie Burke clutched the steering wheel of her father's Model T as the car lurched down the deserted road toward the beach, the headlights barely denting the dark night. Rain spilled over the edges of the canvas top and soaked through her coat, wetting her through to the skin. Plowing through a low bog, the tires sent up a spray of muddy water.

If it weren't for her brother, Laurie would be safe at home, asleep in her bed. She tapped her fingernails against the wheel and breathed a quick prayer.

*One honorable man in my life—is that really too much to ask, God?*

As the road veered to the west, tracing the edge of the bluff, Laurie slowed the automobile to a crawl, scanning the murky shadows for signs of life. She drew in a quick breath as she spotted another automobile, pulled off the side of the road. Perched near the edge of the bluff, the car's front wheels pointed in the direction of the Straits, not that one could see the water on a night like this.

Carefully, she guided the Ford in beside it. Empty. She hadn't expected to spot lovers necking in the front seat, but

only fools would be out on the beach in the dark of night during a storm.

Laurie's stomach churned. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. *Please God, don't let my brother be one of those fools.*

Hands shaking, she retrieved a flashlight, one of her father's prized possessions from his time in the Great War. He wouldn't approve of her borrowing it, but in his current state she couldn't imagine he'd notice it missing.

Before lifting the hood over her hair, she reached up and touched the freshly shorn edges curling around her neck, remembering her flash of anger from the afternoon. How dare he say that she looked like her mother?

A pair of scissors had taken care of that. Lots of other women were bobbing their hair—why should she be left out? But now, as the cold air rushed down her neck, she felt like a freshly shorn lamb turned out into an icy pasture.

Laurie began to open her door, but the stiff wind fought against her. With a mighty heave, she flung it open. Her shoes squelched in the mud as she stepped out, the wind slamming the door shut behind her. The gale knocked her back another step and sent her hood flying onto her shoulders. Icy droplets cascaded down her neck. The flashlight tumbled from her fingers as she turned her back to the wind and grappled with her hood.

Once she wrestled it into place, she scanned the ground at her feet. The light had gone dark. She crouched down, feeling around in the muck until her fingers brushed the cold metal.

Laurie stood, the light clutched in one hand and her hood in the other. She pushed the button and felt a rush of relief as the light clicked on. Swinging it in a wide arc, Laurie searched for the familiar path that wound down the bluff onto the beach. Her family had spent many summer afternoons here when she

and Johnny had been young, but she had never traversed this path in the dark.

The plan had sounded so good earlier, but now that she prepared to take her first steps toward the beach, her knees trembled. The tree branches above her head thrashed like a thousand arms trying to wave her away. Laurie steeled herself. She'd come this far, she refused to turn back now. If her brother was on that beach, she was going to find him.

Movement near the other automobile drew her eyes and lifted the hair on her arms. She aimed the beam at the car—empty. She swung the flashlight in a protective circle, pausing at each suspicious shadow.

Unable to find any ghostly figures lurking nearby, Laurie ground her free hand into her coat pocket. “Stop being ridiculous. You’ve been reading too many dime novels.”

*Just pretend that it's a lovely summer afternoon.* Laurie squared her shoulders, pointed her light at the entrance to the path and stepped away from the relative safety of her father's car. Her confidence lasted for all of six steps before she caught her toe on a tangled root and pitched forward, landing on her hands and knees in the mud.

Tears stung at her eyes. *Johnny, I am going to wring your neck when I catch up with you.*

Laurie wrinkled her nose at the muck and pushed herself up to her knees. The flashlight created a comforting bubble of light around her.

It also helped her to see the hand that suddenly grasped her arm.

Laurie shrieked. Swinging the flashlight, she brought it down on the hand with a loud crack.

The arm recoiled as a yelp of pain rang through the dark night.

Heart pounding, she swung a second time, the glow illuminating the man's startled face just before the hard metal impacted it. The collision sent the flashlight flying from her fingers. It crashed into the ground, plunging Laurie's world back into darkness.

Stifling a second scream, Laurie scrambled backward, dragging her new coat through the mud.

"Wait, wait," a voice panted.

Laurie slid further away. She could hear him thrashing about in search of her. Could she find her car in the dark? And what good would it do—she'd never get it started in time.

The flashlight popped back on and blazed in her direction. She struggled to her feet, determined to put a safe distance between herself and this stranger.

"No, stop! I'm not going to hurt you!"

Laurie darted for the trees and threw herself into the ferns surrounding their bases, heart pounding.

"Look, I was just trying to help," the voice behind the light spoke. "I'm terribly sorry that I frightened you." He pointed the flashlight under his chin, the light cascading upwards, illuminating his features and pooling under the brim of his hat. "Honest, Miss, I didn't mean to frighten you. Please, come out."

The floating head did little to reassure her. Laurie shivered in the brush. The man stood between her and the car. Which terrified her more—the strange man or the pitch-black forest?

She cleared her throat. "Who are you?" Her voice shook.

The light pointed in her direction. Laurie pressed lower into the dripping plants.

"My name is Daniel Shepherd. And I—well, as ridiculous as it sounds on a night like tonight—I was delivering something. I thought I saw lights out on the beach, and I was curious about them, so I stopped."

Laurie lifted her head to peer in his direction. "Let me see your face again."

The stranger obliged. She didn't recognize him, so he wasn't one of Johnny's mill buddies. Considering why she was here, that was a good thing.

Maybe he was telling the truth.

Laurie struggled to her feet, her coat slimed with a combination of mud and pine needles. The man wisely stayed motionless, pointing the light at her feet to guide her steps.

"I *am* sorry," he repeated.

She came to a stop, a few feet away, and stretched out her hand. "I'll need my light."

"Of course." He held it out, handle first. "I hope you won't be using it as a weapon this time."

She leaned forward and grasped it before taking several steps backward.

He gingerly touched the red welt just below his eye. "Can I ask a question now?"

Laurie gripped the mud-encrusted light, trying to steady her shaking hands. "Yes."

"Who are you—and do you know why those people are out on the beach during a rainstorm?"

Laurie's mind raced. "That's two questions." She scrutinized him in the flashlight's dull glow. The man's nice coat and hat set him apart from the typical mill-rats that worked in Port Angeles. Perhaps he was a banker or a doctor? He didn't look like trouble. In fact, he looked quite handsome.

*Which sometimes equals trouble.*

She held the light with one hand and jammed the other into her coat pocket for warmth. "Th-they're oyster picking."

The man's eyes narrowed. "Oysters." The dubious tone was unmistakable.

She set her jaw. "Yes."

In the glow of the light, she could see his cheek twitch as if he were fighting a smile. "Oh. Of course."

Laurie brushed a few leaves from her coat.

He lifted one eyebrow and shoved his hands deep into his pockets as the rain dripped off the brim of his hat. His lip curved upward as he spoke. "Is this a good beach for . . . oysters?"

"The best." Laurie tipped the flashlight higher so she could get a clearer view of the dimple in his cheek. She placed her other hand on her hip, trying to strike a relaxed pose, as if she were accustomed to chatting with strange men in the woods at night. "Do you like oysters, Mr. Shepherd?"

"Well, I haven't had any in quite awhile, but I believe it's practically a staple around here, isn't it?" He lifted a hand to shield his eyes from the light.

Laurie lowered it, slightly, pleased that he was playing along with her charade. "Yes. We love our oysters."

The rain pattered down around them, the silence growing awkward. The absurdity of the moment made her laugh. She lifted her hands to the night. "Doesn't it strike you odd that we're discussing seafood in the middle of the night?"

"In a rainstorm, yes." The dimple reappeared, accompanying a brief smile. "Perhaps we could discuss it another time?"

Laurie felt a flutter in her belly. "What do you mean?"

He took a hesitant step in her direction. "I mean to say, I hope we can discuss it again, sometime." He paused. "In the daylight, of course." He tipped his hat back so she could see his face better.

*Nice face.*

Laurie shook herself. She had to remember why she was here. It certainly wasn't to flirt with strangers. "I need to be going. I will go see if my friends need any help with their—" she cleared her throat, "—their oysters."

"Would you like me to walk you down there?"

Laurie pulled her mud-splattered coat close. "No, that's not necessary. I'm quite familiar with the trail, thank you."

The man didn't move. She took a step backward, hesitant to leave the warmth of their brief conversation.

"You didn't tell me your name." His voice was soft.

"Laurie—Laurie Burke."

The man's eyebrows rose. "Burke?" His eyes lit up. "It's a pleasure, Miss Burke. I think I know some of your family."

Her hope faded like a candle snuffed by the rain. Being acquainted with her family was never a good thing.

"My name is Shepherd, I—"

"Yes, so you said. Now, if you will please excuse me . . ." She spun on her heel, leaving him standing in the rain. The last thing she wanted to do was discuss her family.

"Good night, Miss Burke." His voice trailed after her.

She hurried away, careful to keep the light aimed at her feet to prevent any more mishaps. The rain was beginning to let up, but the leaf-strewn ground still felt slippery. She made it safely to the top of the trail where the sky opened out above the bluff and the soil softened to sand underfoot.

Laurie risked a quick glance over her shoulder. The stranger had been swallowed by the shadows. A twinge of regret pulled at her heart. *It's for the best.* Still, meeting a handsome and mysterious stranger on the bluff brought a flicker of excitement to this otherwise discouraging night.

She picked her way down the steep trail. The sky was clearing quickly, a gusty wind driving the clouds from their places and the moon peeking through, casting a dim light over the beach below. Switching off her light, she allowed her eyes to adjust to the dark. It was time for this night to reveal its secrets. Laurie knew from experience, when men crept around in the dark—it was never for good.

In the distance, a lantern rested on the sand, casting a glow on a small group of men gathered around two boats. One by one, the men hefted out bulky burlap sacks and laid them on the sand. A sick feeling gripped her and she pushed her cold fingers deep into the pockets of her wool coat, all traces of warmth vanishing.

*Johnny, you idiot.*

She walked toward the men, her feet sinking in the wet sand. Crude voices and laughter rang clear in the damp air.

When she was within a few feet, Laurie flicked on her flashlight.

The harsh light gleamed across the boats. The men shouted, their arms flying up to shield their faces. Two dove over the side of the boat into the shallow surf.

The burst of activity reminded her of other beach visits, when she had kicked over rocks to watch sand crabs scuttle away from the sunlight.

Laurie gripped the light in both hands, but the beam still trembled. Slowly, she directed the shaft of light at each figure in turn. Even though the men held their arms over their faces, she quickly identified several of them—from church of all places. She pointed the light at the last shadowy figure.

Her brother stood stock-still in the edge of the surf, a bag balanced on his shoulder, his hat pushed low on his head.

“Johnny.” Her voice shook with disappointment.

Squinting against the glare, he lowered the burlap sack onto the shore. “Laurie?” His eyes narrowed. “Blast it all, girl—what are you doing here?”

A few heads popped up from the waves behind the boat, like sea lions swimming in the surf.

Johnny strode over to where she stood and wrenched the light from her as he swung his own in a wide arc around the beach. He turned on her, the purple rage evident in the dim



light. "Are you crazy? What were you thinking? You could get us all locked up."

Laurie folded her arms across her chest, anger washing over her like the rollers crashing on the shore. "What was I thinking? I was thinking that my brother had more sense than to fall in with rum-runners. But I guess I was wrong."

As the other men returned to their work, Johnny grabbed Laurie's arm and yanked her back toward the bluff. "How did you know I was here?"

"I heard you on the telephone. I was hoping it meant you'd taken a real delivery job, not this sort of nonsense." She spit the words in his face, twisting her arm out of his grip. "How could you?" She turned her back to the beach, trying to avoid the wind blowing into her face. Her stomach churned. "And what about Dad? Are you the one bringing him the liquor?" She clenched her fists.

"Just shut up about it, will you Laurie? You know that we need the money." He glanced up at the bluff. "How did you get out here, anyway?"

Laurie set her jaw. "I drove the Ford."

"And our lookout just let you wander out here? What is he doing, sleeping?"

Laurie's heart fell. *Daniel Shepherd—it figures*. "I think he's playing tourist."

He kicked at the ground, sending up a spray of wet sand. "Worthless piece of dung." He pushed his hands against his eyes. "Shoot, if you'd been a g-man you could have busted this whole operation wide open."

Laurie grabbed his elbow. "That's what I mean, Johnny. It's not worth the risk."

He shook her hand loose. "Go home, Laurie." He turned and trudged back toward the boats.

She stumbled and fought to regain her balance on the slippery rocks. "Maybe I should call those federal agents." Her voice rose over the roar of the wind.

When her brother rounded on her, Laurie gasped and darted toward the path. He caught her three steps later, his arm locked around her midsection, pinning her arms to her sides.

She shrieked as her brother spun her around to face him. The gleam of anger in his eyes sent fear coursing through her. "Let me go!" Her breath came in ragged gasps as his arm crushed against her chest. She searched his face, frightened at his sudden resemblance to their father.

"Johnny, let me go. I'm sorry," she gasped.

Johnny grunted in response and lifted her, hauling her to the grass at the bottom of the bluff before letting her feet touch the ground. He twisted her arm and gave her a shove up the path. "Go home. And keep your trap shut."

She watched him plod back through the sand. Sighing, she turned and wound her way up the path, swallowing hard against the lump in her throat. What had she hoped to accomplish here? Talk Johnny out of rum-running? Or just confirming her anxieties?

Apparently, there was no peace in knowing the truth.

Mr. Shepherd stood waiting at the top of the path. He reached out a hand as if to assist her in the final climb.

"So, how are those oysters?"

His smile made her stomach churn. She brushed aside his hand. "I just remembered, there's a law against gathering oysters under the cover of darkness."

He stuck his hand back into his coat pocket as he glanced back out toward the pinpricks of lights on the beach. "Well, if it's the middle of the night, who's going to know?"

Laurie examined his face in the glow of her light. His rugged jaw and wide smile were endearing. If she'd met him on the streets of Port Angeles, she'd never have guessed that he was a common criminal.

*Maybe there is some benefit to knowing the truth.*

"Somebody will know," she said, turning back toward the automobile.

"Miss Burke," His voice drew her back. He nodded down toward the beach. "I suppose there's a few men down there who might get hurt if somebody were to find out."

A prickle of fear climbed up Laurie's back—this man was using her brother's safety to threaten her? She pulled her coat close. "Then we'd better make sure nobody finds out."

Mr. Shepherd nodded as he walked her to her car and opened the door. "They won't be hearing it from me, Miss Burke. I'd hate to see harm come to anyone."

Laurie slipped into the driver's seat and shut the door. "I think we understand each other, Mr. Shepherd."

He leaned against the door and stared in at her. "I actually don't like oysters, much, myself." His voice was soft, almost entreating.

She stared at his hands, resting on the top rim of the car door. *If only.*

"Me, either," she sighed.

He stepped backward as the Model T roared to life.

The tires slithered through the mire as she backed out into the night. She wanted to get as much distance between her and her brother's mistakes as she could, before dawn.

*Just one, God. That's all I ask.*



Daniel watched Laurie Burke drive away into the night and shook himself. Johnny's kid sister had sure grown up into

a beautiful young woman. What a shame that she'd fallen in with rum-runners. *I suppose Johnny's probably mixed up in that nonsense, too.*

He reached into his pocket and touched the coin that he kept there as a reminder of his own past. He certainly couldn't cast any stones at the Burke family.

*Welcome home, Daniel.*

Blowing on his hands to warm them, Daniel turned back toward his own automobile. He didn't relish getting back on that rutted, windy road. Late night deliveries from the drug store had never been a problem in Seattle, but out here in the sticks, it was a different story. Next time, he'd take Granddad's advice and tell them to wait until morning.

Daniel shook the rain off his coat before sliding into the driver's seat. The rain had finally stopped and the sky was lightening toward dawn. He stretched his arms up over his head. It had been a long night, but not altogether wasted. He closed his eyes for a moment, remembering the all-too-brief smiles on Laurie Burke's face. *Oysters.* No one went to Crescent Beach for oysters. But, it definitely had natural beauty—even in the dark of night.

*Johnny Burke's little sister. Maybe there's some hope for this old town, after all.*

He reached down and switched on the ignition lever. The engine rumbled in response. Throwing one arm across the back of the seat, he eased the car backward onto the highway. When he turned forward once more, he paused. The headlamps cut a path through the dark night, exposing a car hidden in the brush.

A shadowy figure sat behind the wheel.

Daniel shook his head as he pulled away. Apparently he and Miss Burke had not been alone, after all.