

Words Spoken True

CHAPTER 1

Adriane Darcy's heart pounded as the darkness settled down around her like a heavy blanket. Her eyes were open. Open as wide as she could stretch them, but she could see nothing. The dark was claiming her. She wanted to fight it, but what good would it do? The dark always won. Better to sit quiet as a mouse and accept her punishment. That's what her stepmother told her when she pushed her inside the closet under the stairs and slammed shut the door.

Forcing her hand up through the thick black air, Adriane dreaded the feel of the rough inside corners of the closet door. She tried not to make any noise, but something rattled the door. She jerked her arm back and was suddenly fully awake.

It was only a dream. Adriane kicked free of the bedcovers and sat up to fumble for a candle. She needed light.

She gripped the waxy candle but stayed her other hand before she could feel for one of the newfangled matchsticks. She thought of the welcome flare of light the match would bring, but she tightened her jaw and turned loose of the candle. She was no longer a cowering child trapped in dark fear, waiting for the moment light would spill into the closet when her father came to rescue her. She needed no rescue now.

She pulled in a deep breath and blew it out slowly. Familiar shapes began to emerge from the night shadows – the chest with the blue pitcher and basin on top, her small writing desk piled with books and papers, and her wardrobe with the door a bit ajar.

The panic of the dream receded, and she was settling back on her pillow when something clattered against her window. That was the sound in her dream.

Adriane popped up in bed again and stared at the window. For one crazy moment she thought it might be Stanley Jimson come to propose to her in some foolishly romantic way. He certainly needed to do something to make amends to her after totally deserting her at last night's social not to mention asking her father for her hand in marriage without one word to her first.

Not that she wanted to marry Stanley Jimson. She certainly did not. She had yet to meet the man she wished to marry, or more troublesome - her father was wont to say - the man who wished to marry her. Now it appeared there was such a man. Her father had scarcely been able to contain his joy and relief as he told Adriane about her marriage-to-be the night before as if she had no choice in the matter. As if she'd be as happy about it as he so obviously was. After all, Stanley was from one of the most prominent families in Louisville. It was rumored Stan's father, Coleman Jimson, planned to run for state senator in the August election, and money was certainly not an issue.

"What more could any girl want?" Adriane's father asked her.

"A proposal might be nice," Adriane shot back.

Now Adriane grabbed her wrapper and smoothed her dark hair back into some reasonable order before she pushed up the second-story window and peered down at the street.

All thoughts of Stanley Jimson vanished from her mind when she saw Duff Egan getting ready to pitch another pebble toward her window.

The young Irish boy stopped his windup and called softly, "Miss Adriane, they found another body. You told me to be letting you know soon's I heard."

"The river slasher?" Adriane kept her voice low, not much more than a whisper.

"The same."

"Wait there. I'll be right down."

Adriane eased the window closed to keep from waking her father. He'd never allow her out on the streets this time of night for any reason, much less to go to a murder scene. It would be shockingly improper.

In fact her father had denounced the very stories about the murdered Irish girls as somewhat scandalous and not something a respectable newspaper should print. Of course, he did print the stories. A lot of readers liked scandalous, as the Herald and its new editor, Blake Garrett, had proven well enough over the last several months. The Herald's headline scoops on the murders were pushing up its circulation numbers until it was actually beginning to rival the Tribune's numbers. Her father's paper, their paper, had been the leading newspaper in Louisville for over a decade. She planned to keep it that way in spite of the winds of change sweeping through the city.

While her father kept battling against the Herald in his editorials, Adriane thought the real war would be won or lost in the headlines. So she'd had Duff on the lookout ever since the last girl was murdered down in Shippingport.

Adriane yanked on a pair of her father's old trousers and a shirt she had stashed in the bottom of her wardrobe for just this purpose. With a few deft twists, she pinned her thick dark hair flat against her head.

The clock struck two as she slipped out of her room and made her way down the stairs, doing her best to avoid the squeaky boards. Halfway down she caught the acrid smell of ink from the freshly printed editions of the Tribune stacked in the pressroom waiting for morning delivery. Soon people all over Louisville would be opening up the Tribune to find out the news for March 22, 1855.

Adriane could almost hear the rustling papers and see the expressions on the faces of the people reading her and her father's words. The familiar thrill Beck said all good newspapermen felt when they put a new issue on the streets pushed through her.

At the thought of Beck, Adriane held her breath and stepped even more gingerly on the stairs. Beck, her father's right-hand pressman since before Adriane could remember, slept in a small room just off the pressroom. He would tie her to a chair before he'd let her out of the building to chase after a story about a murdered Irish girl. Dear Beck. Like a favored, fond uncle, he'd probably sent up a thousand prayers for her while he worried over her and did his best to protect her. Mostly from herself.

In the front hallway, she grabbed a hat and jacket off the rack and slipped silently out the front door.

"Miss Adriane, is that you?" Duff appeared out of the shadows beside the front stoop, the whites of his eyes shining as he took in her getup.

"None other," Adriane said. "I'm ready to go."

"Could be you shouldn't ought to be going down to the river with me. It won't be no place for a lady." Even in the dim light she could see his troubled frown.

"You're right, Duff, but I won't be a lady. I'll be just one of the fellows."

"Folks ain't always that easy to fool." Duff gave her a hard look. "You may have on breeches, but you have some to learn about how a feller walks."

"Then give me a lesson."

"You have to be throwing your legs out free and easy without worrying about no ruffled petticoats and such." He walked away from her with a swagger.

Adriane stifled a laugh as she followed after him, copying his stride.

"Not bad," Duff said. "But ye'd best keep to the shadows and let me do any talking that needs to be done. There be some things loose clothes can't hide."

"Right," Adriane agreed as the boy turned to lead the way down the street.

Ever since Duff had shown up on the Tribune's doorstep begging a job several months ago, he'd been more like a little brother to her than a regular hand. It had taken some doing for Adriane to convince her father to take the boy on since Duff was only twelve and, even worse, one of the Irish immigrants her father railed against in his editorials. Her father worried the rapid increase in the city's immigrant population was going to bring them all to ruin. He believed some privileges, such as running for elected office, should be reserved for men born in America. Immigrants excluded.

Adriane didn't always agree with her father's politics, but nobody cared what she, a woman, thought. Women were excluded right along with the immigrant population. Women weren't even supposed to bother their heads over such issues. Too much thinking on serious matters was reputed to be injurious to the female brain. Nor were women supposed to go chasing after stories on the wrong side of town in the middle of the night. Her father would be furious if he found out. She took another look back at the building that housed the Tribune offices and their home. No signs of anybody stirring.

With a breath of relief, she hurried after Duff toward the riverfront. Beyond the pools of light from the gas streetlamps, the black night lurked and put out fingers of darkness to claim her. Her heart pounded up in her throat, but she told herself it was only the dream remnants bothering her.

She hadn't had one of those nightmares for years. Her stepmother, Henrietta, was long dead, and no one locked Adriane in dark places anymore. Nothing in the night was threatening her. She was only chasing after a story. That by itself was enough to make her heart beat faster. With excitement. Not fear.

In front of her, Duff slowed and edged closer to the buildings. He grabbed her arm to pull her back beside him before he pointed ahead to where men were milling about in the street.

"Don't be getting too close to any of the watch," he warned her in a whisper. "They favor booting you toward home if they get half a chance."

Adriane moved when Duff moved, melted into the shadows when he stopped as they crept closer to the scene. The quarter moon slipped out from behind the clouds to reflect a bit of light off the river beyond them and give the night an eerie gray look in spite of the streetlamps. It was far too easy to imagine the poor murdered girl's ghost in the misty shadows.

A shiver walked through Adriane as her eyes fastened on a grimy blanket covering what had to be the body. All at once, it wasn't just a story for the Tribune she was trying to beat the Herald to, but a real girl who wouldn't awaken when the sun came up to go about her life as she should.

"Did you know her?" Adriane whispered in Duff's ear.

"No, but one of me sisters did. Kathleen O'Dell's her name. She worked down at the Lucky Leaf. The story I heard said she left early last night, but didn't give no reason why. Nobody saw her after that."

"Nobody but the murderer." Adriane's eyes were fixed on the body. At the sound of footsteps on the walkway, Duff jerked her back into a dark doorway as a man in a rumpled suit hurried past them.

The man spoke to a few of the policeman before he slowly approached the body. He stared down at the covered shape as though gathering his nerve before he knelt down to lift an edge of the blanket. After a long moment, he very carefully let the cover drop back down over the body.

Without proper thought, Adriane stepped out of the doorway to get a better look at the man's face. He might be the girl's father or perhaps a brother. As if the man felt her eyes on him, he stood up and looked directly toward her. The terrible anger on his face made Adriane catch her breath.

Duff grabbed her arm again and pointed in the other direction toward one of the watch. "It looks like Officer Jefferson has spotted us, Miss Adriane." His whisper in her ear was urgent. "We'd best make a run for it. Now."

A large man in uniform was heading their way, swinging his truncheon menacingly as he yelled, "Hey, you two, get on out of here. This ain't no entertainment feature."

Duff tugged on her arm, but Adriane hesitated. She hadn't seen enough yet. That hesitation cost her. The man who'd been looking at the body covered the space between them faster than Adriane thought possible. She gasped as he grabbed her other arm and tried to yank her out into the light. Duff pulled her back toward the shadows.

Adriane tried to jerk free of the man's hold. When he held on grimly, she kicked his shins. He paid the blows no mind as he tightened his grip on her arm. "You know something, don't you?"

His words so surprised her she ceased struggling and looked directly into his dark, intense eyes.

Adriane was about to say something when Duff saved her from her own foolishness by shoving between them to ram his shoulder into the man's middle. "Run," he yelled.

When the man staggered back, Adriane was finally able to jerk free. With a worried glance over her shoulder at Duff, she took off up the street, but she had no need to be anxious about the boy. He slipped away from the man's hands as easily as an eel escaping a net. In a matter of seconds he caught up with her.

"Stick close, Miss Adriane," he said as he passed her.

Adriane didn't need to be told. She stayed right on Duff's heels. It wouldn't do for her to be discovered down here.

Behind them, the man shouted, "Wait. We won't hurt you."

They kept running as Duff led her around and between buildings. Once they ran right through the middle of a warehouse, crawling in a window on one side and running out an open door on the other. After that, they didn't really have to worry about anybody catching them, but Duff didn't slow down until they reached the street leading up to the Tribune offices.

"Too close," Duff gasped as he leaned up against Harrod's Dry Goods Store to catch his breath.

Adriane held her side and pulled in deep breaths. She hadn't run like that since she was a child playing tag with the neighbor kids, but now every nerve in her body was screamingly awake until she

was aware of the slightest noises, the depth of the shadows around the Tribune offices across from them, and even the very air against her skin.

When she caught her breath, she said, "But we made it."

"Only because nobody but fat old Officer Jefferson chased us, and he can't run more than five minutes without taking the wheezes." The boy looked at her, and even in the shadows she could see his concern. "I shouldn't of ought to have taken you down there. If Mr. Darcy finds out, he'll fire me for sure."

"Don't worry. I won't let Father fire you, Duff." Adriane touched the boy's shoulder. Behind them, the sky was already beginning to lighten, so she went on. "Come on in and nap in the pressroom till time to take out the papers."

"Can't," Duff said. "I got to be going home to check on me sisters and me mother." He turned to go but then looked back, a smile stealing across his face again. "It was some chase for sure, wasn't it, Miss Adriane?"

"That it was." Adriane laughed and gave the boy a little shove down the street. "Now go on with you. I don't want to have to explain to Beck why you're late to get your papers."

The minute he took off in an easy jog, Adriane remembered she hadn't asked him if he knew the name of the man who'd grabbed her, but she didn't call him back. Instead, after noting how the eastern sky was turning a pale pink, she took off her shoes and slipped through the front door. Without a sound, she crept past the pressroom, but she didn't make it. Beck grabbed her by the collar.

"Hold it, you scalawag," he growled. When he spun Adriane around to face him, her hat fell off. He blinked his eyes a couple of times and leaned down closer to her face as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing in the dim morning light. "Addie?"

"Shh, Beck. Don't wake Father." She looked from Beck to the stairs and then back at Beck.

The old man took in her trousers and tried to look cross, though one corner of his mouth twitched up. "I reckon as how that wouldn't be a good idea right now." Beck shook his head with a heavy sigh. "I'd ask you what you've been up to, but I ain't all that sure I want to know."

"I was just trying to beat Garrett to a headline for once."

"And what headline you been out chasing?"

"They found another Irish girl stabbed to death down on the riverfront." Adriane turned her eyes from Beck to the pile of papers just inside the pressroom that were nothing but old news now.

All signs of a smile vanished from Beck's face. "Addie, tell me you didn't go down to the riverfront."

"Oh, don't look so shocked." Adriane touched the old man's wrinkled cheek. "Nobody knew it was me."

"What were you thinking, Addie?" Beck frowned at her.

"That maybe we could beat Garrett to that headline."

"All the headlines in the world ain't worth you taking that kind of risk. You'd best be sending up a thankful prayer that your guardian angel was watching over you."

"I know, Beck. I will and you'll be sending them up with me, won't you?" She gave him her best smile. She knew Beck couldn't stay upset at her.

"It's a fact you need praying over." He shook his head again as his frown faded. "I don't reckon it's any use fussing at you. You're too hardheaded by far to listen to nothing nobody says anyhow."

"I've always listened to you, Beck."

"Then listen to this." He gave her shoulder a firm shake. "You'd best get on some decent ladies' clothes before the boss catches you in this getup."

Adriane looked down at the trousers damp from the river mist. She sighed. "You're right as always.. Father would tell me I'm ruining my chances for a decent marriage and here when someone has at last asked me to marry him."

"What's this about marrying?"

"You haven't heard?" Adriane kept her voice light. "Stanley Jimson asked Father for my hand in marriage last evening. Father's ecstatic."

"You don't say. Well then." Beck wouldn't quite meet her eyes as he went on. "It's said the Jimsons are one of the finest families in Louisville."

"Richest anyhow," Adriane said.

"Money comes in right handy at times."

"So I've heard." Adriane looked at Beck and stopped pretending. If there was one person she could be honest with, it was Beck. "You don't like Stan, do you?"

Beck finally looked back up at her. The wrinkles around his eyes tightened some as he reached out and laid his hand on her cheek. "It don't make no matterance who it is I like, Addie. What you got to worry about is who it is you can take a liking to."