

# Hidden Secrets

P.L. Harris



Western Australia

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# Dedication

For my Mum - Your constant support and encouragement over the years has guided me on my life's journey. Thank you for instilling in me that dreams really can come true.

For Pauline and Bronwyn – Thank you for sharing in my writing journey from the early days. Your support and encouragement has meant the world to me.

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# Chapter One

AMANDA STEVENS FLUNG open the fridge, her empty stomach groaning at its lack of edible contents. An uneasy feeling knotted her stomach. It was Thursday—payday.

*What's with the empty fridge? Why hasn't Mum gone shopping? She always does shopping on Thursday afternoon.*

Amanda glanced at her watch. 8:00 p.m. She should be chilling at the Esplanade Hotel in Fremantle now, winding down after submitting her last assignment, not staring at an empty fridge. Thanks to her friend Maria's sudden migraine, their celebrations would have to wait.

Her mum was usually home by the time she returned from her Australian History tutorial. She scanned the kitchen bench for a note.

*None. Mum, you're supposed to leave me a note or text if you're going out.*

The creak of the Jarrah floorboards above her

head startled her. She clutched her chest and breathed a sigh of relief.

*For God's sake, why didn't she come down when she heard me come in?*

Rolling her eyes at the ceiling, Amanda stormed into the lounge room, ready to give her mother a piece of her mind.

She froze. Her eyes widened in alarm. Amanda scanned the tattered remnants of what used to be their family lounge room.

They'd been burgled.

The image before her resembled a war zone. Amanda's gut clenched and her feet wouldn't move, as if they were cemented to the floor. Each lounge slashed, stuffing everywhere, ripped cushions scattered amid smashed lamps. The glass coffee table shattered into a million shards. Artwork ripped from the wall. She spotted her family pictures smashed to smithereens.

*What sort of people would do such a thing?*

Tears welled in her eyes. Each destroyed memory was like a knife to her heart. Footsteps pounded the floorboards above. Too many to be one

person.

*They're still here.*

Panic flared in her chest and fear was thick in her throat. If this is what they could do to her house, she couldn't imagine what they would do to *her* if they found her. Alarm screamed in her mind as if she were a lost child, terrified of the unknown. She gasped, her lungs struggling to take in much-needed air.

*Mum, where are you? Oh, my God. Were you here when they arrived?*

Amanda fought the panicked urge to search for her. She was paralyzed with fear of what she might find if she made it upstairs. The image of her mother's broken, bloodied body strewn across her bedroom floor terrified her.

*Mum, please don't let me find you upstairs, injured or worse. Dead.*

Amanda rubbed her shaking hands down her jeans. *I'm here, Mum, I'm not leaving without you.* A gruff male voice at the top of the stairs nabbed her attention. She had about thirty seconds before she ended up collateral damage.

She bolted to the kitchen, her heart beating

wildly against her ribcage as if a stampede ran rampant in her chest. After grabbing her backpack, she disappeared into the broom cupboard. Although tiny, there was enough space to squeeze her small limbs into a tight ball. Amanda crouched and held her breath, praying they'd already searched the kitchen.

“Start again,” the same gruff voice yelled from the lounge room. “Tear this place apart inch by inch, if you have to. I want that locket. Find me that locket.”

*Locket, what locket? Surely, they can't mean my locket?*

“Well, well, well, what do we have here? Check this out, boys.”

*Check what out? Oh, my God, what did he find?*

“Looks like she has a daughter. Maybe we'll have some leverage, after all.”

Amanda masked her gasp with her hand.

“Daughter for the locket, fair trade, don't you think, boys?” Brusque laughter rang out across the room.

Amanda swallowed the golf ball-sized lump in her throat. She was stunned by the conversation unfolding only meters away.

*Me, for the locket. Who are these people and why do they want my locket?*

Holding her breath, she cracked open the broom cupboard door an inch, just enough to see the back of a tall, dark-haired man standing in the middle of the lounge room. He turned, and Amanda recoiled at the sheer evil set deep in his eyes. Dressed in a black tailored, pinstriped suit he looked straight out of a 1920s gangster movie.

*Gangsters don't exist anymore, do they?*

His black, spiky, close-cut, army-style haircut and his Van Dyke beard screamed danger. He walked away, smirking at one of the other men. He wouldn't win any beauty contests, but he might actually have been cute if he weren't trying to destroy her house. Puzzled by his harsh assault on her mother, Amanda refused to believe his insulting references, or that her beautiful mother could possibly be involved with these horrid men.

Pain shot up her legs. Godawful agony from being stuck in the same position was making her nauseated. The last thing she wanted to do was puke. As the hushed voices became louder, she held her

breath and tried valiantly not to panic.

“That stupid woman is going to pay. Pay for running, pay for stealing—” A high-pitched ringtone cut him off midsentence.

*Stealing? Stealing what?*

Her heart hammered like a timpani drum.

“No, sir, we haven’t found it yet. I understand that, sir...yes, but...yes, sir. Fine. We’re on our way.”

Footsteps faded into the distance. Certain they were no longer in the kitchen, she silently and slowly expelled her breath. She waited and waited. Spine-chilling silence filled the house.

Amanda jumped. The vibration of her mobile against her backside frightened her. She shot her hand up to cover her mouth, muffling an impending shriek. Thank God, she’d left it on silent after her uni tutorial had finished. She slid her fingers into her back pocket to retrieve her phone. Her mother’s smiling face flashed across the screen.

“Mum?” she whispered. “Mum, where are you?”

“Amanda, I haven’t got much time. I need you to listen to me carefully.”

“What is going on?” Her shaky voice failed to

hide her fear. “Why are there men tearing our house apart?”

“Amanda, I need you to be silent for one minute.” Amanda balked at the sharp snap in her mother’s voice. “Wait, where are you?”

“I’m hiding in the broom cupboard,” she whispered. Fear snaked up her spine. “Silently praying that the men ripping our house apart don’t find me.”

“Oh, my God.” Her mother gasped. “What are you doing home? You should have just finished your tutorial?”

“Mr. Shuehouse’s wife is sick, so he cut our tutorial short.” Her throat was hoarse from whispering. “Maria had a migraine, so I came home instead of heading to Fremantle. Now, tell me what’s going on. Who are these people?”

“They’re looking for me.”

“What?”

“Well, more precisely, they’re looking for something I have.” She paused. “I don’t have time to explain now, sweetheart. I need you to do exactly as I say—”

“But, Mum—”

“Amanda, please, you need to do exactly as I say. Both our lives depend on it.”

Amanda froze, her blood turning to ice in her veins.

“When it’s safe, I want you to get the blue topaz locket I gave you for your birthday. You still have the locket don’t you? Please tell me you still have it.”

*They’re after my blue topaz locket. Why?*

“Yes, of course I’ve got it. Why do they want my locket?”

“Amanda, just do as I say and get the locket,” her mother barked down the line.

“You’re really scaring me now.” Her voice was edged with worry. “What’s going on?”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart...there’s no time to explain now, but I promise I will as soon as I can,” she said. The panic in her voice seized Amanda by the throat. “Most importantly, trust no one, Amanda, and I mean *no one*. Now, take the locket and leave town immediately. Find somewhere safe. I promise I *will* find you.”

“L-leave town? Where would I go?”

“Anywhere. You’re a smart girl. You’ll figure it out. Just do as I ask, please. I love you. Never forget I love you more than life itself.”

The phone rang off with a thud.  
“Mum...Mum...”

Squeezing her eyes shut, she gripped the phone to her chest. Her hands shook against the fear that spread through her body. A sharp crack of thunder jolted Amanda back to her dismal reality.

*Why does the weatherman have to be right?* Cold and alone. The sudden drop in temperature ricocheted through Amanda.

*Where am I going to go? I can't leave town without you, Mum.*

Amanda held her breath, cracked the door open a few inches, and peered out. The house was bathed in darkness. She waited and listened, but all that greeted her was prolonged silence.

*They've gone. I hope.*

The cold air hit her like a slap in the face. Her mother’s words repeated in her mind like a broken record. *Get the locket, get out, and trust no one.*

Certain they’d gone, Amanda eased the door

open. The house was as pitch black as the dead of night. She crawled along the kitchen floor. Her head collided with a solid metal object. She moaned, frantically rubbing the painful spot. This was useless. She wasn't going to be able to see a thing that way.

Convinced she was alone, she held tight to her backpack and flooded the room with a single beam of dim light from the app on her phone.

After going to her room, she quickly retrieved her locket from the hidden drawer in her desk and then secured it around her neck. She'd worn it to her friend Maria's twenty-first birthday party last Saturday. They obviously hadn't been after money, since they'd smashed her piggy bank all over the dressing table. She shoved the notes into her pocket. There wasn't much, but it would have to do.

Amanda angled the spotlight to the wall of pictures lining the staircase, happy snaps of her and her mum in each new town they'd moved to. She smiled at the shot of them in front of the Golden Guitar in Tamworth, one of Amanda's favorite places. Each one smashed, but the memories were still intact.

The rattle of the window frame stole her attention, reminding her it was going to be a cold night. She grabbed her parka, filled her backpack with two water bottles from the fridge, and slipped out the back door.

\* \* \* \*

Flashes of lightning burnt the night sky as the storm rolled in from the sea. Not wanting to bring danger to any of her friends' doorsteps, Amanda huddled in the corner of the old, rickety treehouse on the corner block. Closing her eyes tight, she prayed the ice-cold wind wouldn't mean her death. They'd be expecting her to leave, run for her life, just like her mother. They'd probably be scouring the bus and train depots in Perth, waiting for her to make a wrong move. An archaic children's treehouse, three streets away, would be the last place they'd think to look for her.

Amanda's fingers shook as she dialed her mum's number...again. Partly from the bitter cold roaring through the treehouse, but mostly from concern for her mother's safety. Why wouldn't she answer? She felt the blood drain from her face. Maybe she *couldn't*

answer, and maybe she was already dead.

*How could my life be so normal one minute, then I'm on the run—fighting to stay alive—in the next?*

The thick layer of dust on the little table swirled under the force of the wind. She hiccupped. A white tattered teddy bear, hidden behind a plastic tool bench, stared at her, its innocent, sweet eyes watching her like a hawk. Her chest tightened. It was just like the one she'd gotten for her seventh birthday.

Memories flooded her mind, memories of a birthday—laughing, singing, and dancing with her mother at a new home in another new town. Amanda's chest warmed at the memory of her mother's archaic dancing skills.

Her teeth chattered from the cold. "I...I should be able to hide here for the night." She breathed a small sigh of relief, dialing her mum's number one more time. "Until I can figure out how to find you, Mum." Another failed attempt. "That's if you're still alive."

A gust of wind circled the deserted treehouse. The hideous night was determined to push her to the breaking point, but she wouldn't let it win. She

couldn't. Her life depended on it.

Rummaging under the toys, she found an old blanket and a baseball bat. She wrapped the flimsy blanket firmly around her shoulders and pulled her knees up, clutching them tight to her chest. The baseball bat sat beside her. She closed her eyes and wished she could go back to this morning, before this nightmare started, when she had been a normal, happy university student.

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