

In His Protection

P.L. Harris



Western Australia

First published by Gumnut Press
Copyright © 2019 P.L. Harris
Edited by Nina S. Gooden (www.greenteaandpinkink.com)
Proofed by Lisa Edward
Cover design by Victoria Cooper
(<https://thebookcoverdesigner.com/designers/victoria-cooper-art>)

All Rights Are Reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any form by any electronic, mechanical, or any other device now known or invented hereafter without permission of the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be constructed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale or organisations is entirely coincidental.

These forms include, but are not limited to xerography, photocopy, scanning, recording, distributing via internet means, informational storage and retrieval system.

Because of the dynamic nature of the internet, any web address or links contained in this book may have changed since publication and may no longer be valid.

National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-publication data:
In His Protection/Gumnut Press
ISBN: (sc) 978-0-6481800-9-8
ISBN: (e) 978-0-6483729-4-3
General-Fiction
Romantic Suspense

Gumnut Press books may be ordered through online booksellers or by contacting Gumnut Press.

info@gumnutpress.com

Dedication

To my wonderful niece, Kara-Lee.

You were the inspiration behind the Burrum Ridge series and I will be forever grateful for your continual support. Noah and Melody came to life because of you.

My sister-in-law, Bethwyn.

Thank you for the many hours you have spent listening to me flesh out this story and that of the series. Your advice and guidance have never failed me and I am truly grateful.

Also by P. L. Harris

Contemporary Romance

Callie's Dilemma
Second Chance at Love
Christmas Fever
Mask of Desire
Juliet's Kiss

Romantic Suspense - Burrum Ridge Series

Book 1 - In His Protection

Romantic Suspense - Young Adult

Hidden Secrets

Polly Holmes (P.L. Harris)

Amateur Sleuths - The Cupcake Capers Series

Book 1 - Cupcakes and Cyanide
Book 2 - Cupcakes and Curses
Book 3 - Cupcakes and Corpses
Book 4 - Mistletoe and Murder
Book 5 – Dead Velvet Cupcakes

Publishers Stocking P.L. Harris Books

Amazon

Serenity Press

Gumnut Press

Blue Swan Publishing

Evernight Publishing

~ One ~

How could one little photograph cause so much trouble?

Melody Maddison pulled into the car bay opposite Shingles Café. Had they followed her? Her pulse raced as she checked her rear vision mirror and scanned the surrounds of her car. Everything appeared normal as if it were another ordinary day in the country town of Burrum Ridge. Melody knew better. Her life was fast spinning out of control, ever since she'd discovered the hidden photograph of her mother holding a newborn baby. She didn't know what was worse, finding the photograph, or the fact that her mother had lied about giving birth to a baby that was clearly neither her, nor her siblings

Grabbing her bag, she high-tailed it across the road and slid herself down at an empty table in the corner of the alfresco section. Growing up, Shingles Café had always been her favourite place to watch the world go by, and the new industrial-chic re-vamp meant it was more popular than ever, *and* they had the best Caesar salad this side of Perth. Searching her bag for her phone, she re-checked it for the twentieth time. *No missed calls.*

A monotone voice from behind made her flinch. "Would you like to see the menu?"

"Um, no, thanks. Just a regular chai latte with skim milk."

In His Protection

“No problem. Won’t be long,” said the young waitress as she strutted away.

Melody swallowed the lump in her throat. *Are they watching me now? Do they know I’m here?* She held tight to her handbag and her gaze scanned a hundred different directions, trying to see someone, anyone, out of place.

Normal. Everything around her seemed normal for a Sunday afternoon. The warm, afternoon sea breeze sailed through the tall gum trees. Children played in the park. The pesky kookaburras were out in full swing, singing at the top of their lungs, determined to be noticed. If she hadn’t known better, she’d swear they were laughing at her. Mums were catching up on gossip over coffee. Tourists were walking up and down the main street. Just as it should be in any country tourist town.

Melody breathed a sigh of relief. “Get a grip, not everyone is out to get you.” *No, just those behind the prank calls and anonymous notes.*

A butterfly war was turning her stomach into a jungle of nerves. She pulled out the note she’d found under her windscreen earlier. A chill hit her square in the chest. A new shrill of fear snaked up her spine, just as it had when she’d found the note. Melody double-checked once more that no-one was watching before she read it. Her hands started to tremble as the words screamed at her from the page.

Stop digging, bitch, or face the consequences. It won’t just be you six feet under the ground. I’ll make sure your sister joins you. Her blood will be on your hands.

The blood in her veins ran cold. She'd been okay when she'd believed she was getting simple prank calls. She'd been annoyed, but not scared. Now she knew it was more and her first concern was Riley. She had to protect her sister.

All I need to do is forget I found the photograph and life will return to normal. She sighed knowing full well she was fooling herself.

“Here you go. One regular, skim-milk chai latte.”

Melody almost jumped out of her skin. She crushed the note hard against her chest and glared at the waitress.

“Um...thank you,” Melody said.

The waitress smiled and started clearing away empty plates from nearby tables.

Why was the photograph hidden and why the hell does someone want me to stop looking for answers? Melody's hands shook but she managed to ease the hot coffee to her lips and blow. The sweet, spicy liquid ran smoothly, cascading down her throat. *Damn, that's good.* Just what she needed.

Melody fished the picture of her mother and the newborn child out of her bag. She'd stared at it for hours, trying to work out when it was taken. *It's not me, Riley or Lachlan so who then, Mum? God, I miss you so much.*

Angry tears threatened to spill at the thought of her mother. She rubbed at the sudden burn of fury in her chest. Reasonable or not, she was angry that her mother had left them, and furious that God had taken her so young.

In His Protection

The clang of the church bells signalled five o'clock, startling Melody. She glanced toward the bell tower. "Are you serious? Where the hell did that hour go?"

The vibration of her phone against the metal table caught her attention. "Hello," she said, eager to find the next piece to the puzzle.

"Good afternoon, Melody. It's Margaret, dear."

There was no mistaking Margaret's warm, gentle voice. Melody had hoped she would recall her mother giving birth, since she'd been a nurse at Burrum Ridge hospital, but Margaret hadn't remembered her mother, or the photo.

"I think I may have remembered something."

Melody's pulse quickened and her spine straightened in her chair. "Really, you remember my mother?"

The sorrowful tone in Margaret's voice tore at Melody's heart. "Afraid not, dear."

"Oh."

Margaret continued. "I forgot to mention Brian when we met the other day. He was the registrar at the time and if anyone would remember your mother, it would be Brian."

"Really?"

"Yes, I called him to let him know you'll be in touch, but if you have a pen, I have his contact details here."

Oh my God, yes, yes, yes.

She jotted down Brian's details so fast she could barely read her scribbled handwriting. "Thank you so much, Margaret. This means the world to me."

“You’re welcome, dear. Good luck,” she said and ended the call.

Melody’s fingers fumbled as she dialled Brian’s number. It took three attempts before she punched the correct numbers into the keypad. “Come on, Brian. Pick up, pick up,” she mumbled to herself as she tapped her fingernails impatiently on the metal tabletop. No answer. She dialled again. No answer. She tried a third time. Still no success.

Disheartened, she scanned the Perth address on the paper. It would take a good three hours to get to Perth this time of day on a Sunday evening, but Margaret did say she told him she’d be in touch. Determination coursed through her body.

No time like the present. See you in three hours, Brian.

She shoved the paper and photo back in her bag and left a ten-dollar note on the table under her empty cup. She bolted across the road to her car, rustling around in her bag for the car keys. “Where the hell are they?”

Shit, I must have left them at the café.

She was half-way across the road before it registered in her muddled mind that a speeding turquoise-blue car was barreling straight for her. She froze and began to shake. Her legs wouldn’t move, it was as if they were lead weights fastening her to the road. Melody couldn’t suck in enough air to her lungs. The image of her sister and brother flashed across her mind.

The next few minutes of her life happened in lightning speed, except she didn’t remember moving. One minute, she was frozen facing down a horrific death and the next, she was being thrown up

against a parked car on the side of the road, blanketed by a mass of taut muscle.

The deep timbre of a male voice broke through her scattered thoughts. “Are you all right?”

She gasped and her hands shook frantically as she tried to breathe, but nothing happened. Her back arched and she pushed at the stranger in a desperate panic. She squeezed her eyes shut and felt her chest tighten as if a tonne of bricks had just fallen from the sky and landed on her sternum.

Cool, strong hands gripped her cheeks and her eyes flew open. Her gaze locked onto the hazel eyes inches from hers. “You’re all right. Just breathe,” he said, coaxing her.

Short staccato breaths filled her lungs and she grabbed on to his shoulders to steady her jelly legs.

“That’s it, now you’ve got it. Big breaths for me. In and out...nice and slow.”

Melody followed his lead and started breathing in time with her saviour. “Wha...wha...”

“Shh, don’t try to speak. Just let your breathing get back to normal first.”

Her jittery hands flew to her forehead. “What happened?” Her voice just above a whisper.

“Well, from where I was standing, it looked like someone tried to purposely run you down.”

Run me down? Kill me. The words shot through her mind like a cannonball. *They really do want me dead.* She thought they were bluffing. The reality of her situation was rapidly sinking in. “Oh God, I think

I'm going to be sick." She pushed him out of the way and bolted toward the gutter. Bile rose from the pit of her stomach and lodged itself in her throat. Tears stung her eyes and in one last hurl, she pitched the disgusting, foul-tasting fluid from her mouth.

Melody's knees almost gave way and if it weren't for her saviour's strong arms holding her up, she may have slid to the ground.

"Easy there. You're going to be okay." He held her safe. Her numb body melted against his warm touch. A wave of embarrassment washed over her and she quickly wiped her mouth in an effort to regain an ounce of self-respect.

His deep, soothing voice broke through her chaotic thoughts. "Are you sure you're okay?"

She nodded. "Um...thank you for saving my life."

"No problem," he said, easing her against the bonnet of a nearby car. "All in a day's work."

A day's work? Was he some kind of superhero that jumped to the rescue of women who nearly get run down?

She stopped and for the first time, soaked up the picture of pure indulgence standing before her. No wonder he had been able to pull her out of the way of the car. His tight chest would do any soldier proud. But it wasn't his chest that held her hypnotised, it was the deep depths of his hazel eyes that mesmerised her.

"I don't know how to thank you."

His gaze held hers. "Maybe you could tell me why someone wanted to mow you down in broad daylight."

Melody's eyes widened. "I don't know."

In His Protection

Liar.

“That was no random accident. They targeted *you*.”

She felt the blood drain from her face. *Oh God, Mum, what are you hiding that someone would kill to keep secret?*

She shrugged. “Maybe it was mistaken identity.”

“Then why were you so jumpy at the café?”

Her brow creased and she took a moment for his words to register. A sinking feeling washed over her. “The café? Were you watching me?”

A sheepish grin worked its way across his face. “It was hard not to. The moment you sat down, you caught my attention.”

Her mouth rounded in an O.

“I’ve seen red hair before, but I’ve never seen such a beautiful shade of fire-engine red. It fascinated me.” He frowned. “I couldn’t draw my eyes away and it wasn’t long before it became apparent that something was seriously wrong. Is someone following you?”

She frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“You were as skittish as a new-born colt. Nervous, always looking around and when the waitress came with your coffee, I thought you were going to jump right out of your chair.”

Damn it, I’m going to have to do better next time.

“Listen, if you’re in trouble, maybe you should get help.”

Melody’s rigid body shot off the car. “No.” She paused. “Thank you for your assistance today, but I need to be going.”

He stiffened and cautiously stepped back. “Could I at least know the name of the angel I saved today?” he asked with a smile.

Melody chuckled. “Angel, ha. I hardly think so, but it’s Melody.” She thrust her hand out in his direction. “Melody Maddison.”

He threaded his fingers through hers and the warmth of his touch blazed up her arm like wildfire.

“It’s very nice to meet you, Melody Maddison,” he said with a smile. His long fingers fished a card out of his top pocket and placed it in her hand. “Noah St. Reeve, at your service.”

At my service? Melody scanned the card. NSR Services. Noah St. Reeve. Security and Personal Protection.

She looked up at his hazel eyes from under hooded lashes. “Personal protection?”

“That’s right. Personal protection, and I’m the best at what I do. If you’re in trouble, maybe I can help.”

Her heart beat faster as his words repeated in her head. It was bad enough she had to try and keep her secret from Riley, she didn’t want to have to lie to more people.

Melody smiled and pocketed his card. “Thank you. If I ever find myself in need of rescuing again I’ll be sure to give you a call, but I think I’ll be fine.” She was conscious of his heated gaze following her as she hopped in her car and headed north, toward Perth via the neighbouring town of Telk Creek.

She usually enjoyed the drive up to Perth, but after her scare, it took her longer than normal to settle into the long drive. Thankfully, the spring wildflowers were out in full bloom and brightened her spirits. It was that time of the year again when her

hay-fever would make an unwelcomed arrival thanks to the wattle trees.

She'd made good time and hit Talk Creek in thirty minutes, the average time between towns in the country. She'd just turned down the shortcut behind the cemetery when the Eurythmics song, *Sisters Are Doin' It for Themselves* blasted her eardrums.

Her stomach dropped when her eyes caught sight of her sister's gorgeous smile on the screen. "Great, just what I need. How am I going to explain this?"

"Riley, hi. What's up?"

"Melody, where are you?" Riley said in her usual big sister tone. "You promised you'd be home ages ago to help sort some more of Mum's boxes."

Melody sighed. "I know and I'm really sorry, but something came up. I'll be home later this evening and I promise I'll get straight back to work."

"You can't be serious?" Riley snapped. "Since you've been back, you've done nothing except avoid helping. You know you need to pull your weight, now that Lachlan's job overseas has been extended."

Riley was half right. The air squeezed from Melody's lungs, crushed by an invisible hand. "I know I haven't helped you much since Mum died and you're completely within your rights to yell at me, considering my track record. But this is kind of important to me and I have been sorting Mum's old boxes from the loft."

Otherwise, how would I have found the secret photo she kept a mystery for all these years?

Ever since Melody could remember, Riley had liked to pull the big sister card. She seemed to forget that Melody was now twenty-eight years old. Melody shook her head and took a deep breath, calming her fiery insides. “Listen, I’ll be back before you know it. I just have to see someone and then I promise we’ll chat and I’ll continue sorting through the boxes.”

Melody gripped the wheel and her heart jumped into her throat. The engine of her Suzuki Swift started coughing and the car jerked forward in small bunny hops.

No, no, no this can't be happening. Not now, not here.

“Who?” Riley asked. “Who are you seeing?”

“I’ll fill you in later. Listen, I’ve got to go. Bye.” Melody rung off before Riley could squeeze another word out.

“Please don’t stop, not here where all the dead people are,” Melody begged aloud. “I promise I’ll book you for that service, just please get me to the other side of town where the people are living.”

Her car had ideas of its own, pulling to a jerking stop on the side of the road beside the cemetery entrance. Her heart was pounding inside her ribcage. The sky was filled with a stunning crimson, magenta sunset that stretched across the horizon. A vast contrast to the darkened image of death in the surrounding graveyard.

“Great, this is just what I need.” *What kind of idiot leaves their car in a garage for almost two years and then forgets to have it checked by a mechanic before a long trip?* “Me, that’s who.”

The graveyard was on the outskirts of town. No homes, no businesses within walking distance. Fear knotted her stomach. *Could*

they have followed me? Her heart pummelled her chest like a timpani drum.

Oh God, what am I going to do? Melody took a deep breath. Her suspicious gaze shooting from one side of the road to the other. Dead silence.

How will I get home now? There was no-one around to ask for a lift and it would cost a fortune in cab fare to get back to Burrum Ridge—money she didn't have. *I can't call Riley because then I'll have to explain why I was on my way to Perth and then I'll have to tell her about the photograph.*

“How the hell do I get myself into these situations?” she said, leaning her head back on the headrest. She bolted upright in her seat, her pulse kicking into overdrive. A high-pitched cry of an animal served as a stark reminder of her dismal predicament.

“Seems I need rescuing again,” she muttered, shoving her hand in her pocket and pulling out Noah's card. “NSR Services. Noah St. Reeve, Security and Personal Protection.”

Could I? She thought. *Well, I did say I'd call if I needed rescuing again.* What other option did she have?

Want to read more?

Buy now at <https://www.gumnutpress.com>

Keep up to date on P.L. Harris' book releases, signings and events on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/plharrisauthor>

Follow P.L. Harris Readers Group:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/217817788798223>

Website: <http://www.plharris.com.au>

