

Silent Scream

Lynda La Plante

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Extract

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Chapter One

The driver was not her usual one, but as the night filming had been completed ahead of schedule, she had been released from the set in West London earlier than expected. Amanda Delany didn't mind though; all the unit drivers had become friends of the entire film company. The Mercedes drew up outside her mews house in Belgravia and she jumped out quickly. The driver made sure she was safely inside the house before he drove off. She liked that because the overhanging ivy around her front door made it possible for someone to hide there and she was cautious, although none of her fans knew her new address.

Amanda loved the little house. She had only really been in residence eight weeks, but she had purchased it eighteen months ago. The renovations and the decoration had been completed before she had moved in, and it still had the lingering smells of new carpets and paint.

She was tired, it was almost midnight, and she decided to go straight to bed, relieved that she wasn't still filming until four in the morning – which was when the night shoot usually ended. Tomorrow she would be collected mid-afternoon. They were shooting in summer and it didn't get dark until almost nine.

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Amanda took a quick shower and got into her bed, new like everything else in the mews house. This was the first place that she had owned, the first time she had lived on her own, without flatmates or boyfriends. She had changed partners almost as frequently as she had film-ing commitments, which made perfect fodder for the tabloids. Her lovers had invariably been her co-stars and, although she was still only twenty-four years old, Amanda had broken up two marriages. Her last affair, with a famous movie star, had been very public. Amanda was one of a clutch of young, very beautiful actresses about to break into the big time, and her agent had warned her to curb her sexual exploits, or risk damaging her blossoming career.

She fell deeply asleep straight away but woke up an hour later. For a few moments she was disorientated and reached for the clock on her bedside table, wondering if she had inadvertently set the alarm. Night filming was always difficult to adjust to, and often she found it hard working through the night and catching up on sleep during the day. Had there been a change of schedule? Had it been the telephone that had woken her? Amanda threw back the duvet and went to the window to look into the mews courtyard, but it was empty.

Back in bed, she snuggled down, must have dropped off again, and then woke with a start. The scream was hideous, a scream of such agony and terror that her heart lurched with fear. She sat up listening, waiting for it to continue, waiting for something to happen. But nothing did. Terrified, she got up again to look from the window into the courtyard. She turned on the lights and went from the bedroom down the narrow hall. All was silent, and from her kitchen annexe downstairs she looked into

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the back garden, a small paved square with high walls surrounding it. She wondered if it was perhaps a wounded animal she'd heard.

Returning to her bedroom, leaving all the lights on, she couldn't stop hearing that terrible single scream echoing in her head. The more she thought about it, the more certain she was that it was a woman screaming. She recalled being cast as the victim of a serial killer in a movie that required her to scream, and when she couldn't get the right pitch, they had brought in another actress who specialised in bloodcurdling screams. She remembered when she watched the finished film how chilling the moment had been.

Eventually she went back to sleep, aided by two sleeping tablets. She didn't wake until mid-morning and, brewing up fresh coffee, she wondered if it had simply been a nightmare that had woken her.

She spent the rest of the day learning her lines in preparation for the night's filming. Her usual driver collected her mid-afternoon to take her to the set for make-up and hair. He apologised for not being available the previous evening.

'This weird thing happened last night,' she said.

'Who drove you?' he asked.

'Oh, nothing to do with that. I was in bed and this terrible scream woke me up.' She frowned and leaned forwards. 'I don't know if it was the screaming that woke me – you know, if it had gone on before – but it was just one long terrible scream and it really scared me.'

'Maybe it was a cat – or one o' these urban foxes they go on about?'

'No, no, it didn't sound like either of those. At first, I

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thought it *was* maybe an animal but . . . I think it was a woman.'

'Did you call the police?'

'No, I didn't because it all went quiet and I couldn't see anyone outside or in the back garden. I just went back to bed.'

In the make-up trailer, Amanda repeated the incident to her hairdresser. She told it over again to her make-up artist and it brought forth a slew of stories from the girls about nightmares and how hard it was, working nights, to get to sleep. She told the director about how frightened she had been. His response was to joke that it would probably help her performance. They were about to shoot a scene where she was to be confronted by the arch villain, who attempts to strangle her because he knows that she can identify him.

The film was yet another version of *Gaslight*, a Victorian thriller in which a young wife is terrorised by her husband, intent on frightening her to death in order to claim her inheritance. The script had been adapted by a young writer who hoped, with the use of state-of-the-art special effects, to turn it into a successful killer chiller, its dark foreboding style in homage to *Nosferatu* and early silent horror films. The director, Julian Pike, was only twenty-seven and with just one successful art-house movie to his credit, so a lot depended on this much bigger-budget extravaganza.

The filming went well, with only a few delays. They were shooting the exterior shots in a manmade cobbled street lit by gas lamps that backed onto a massive hangar where the main set, with its remarkable reconstruction of a Victorian house, was standing. Tonight they were

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filming the scene where Amanda, cast as the young wife, returns from the opera with her husband and alights from the carriage to enter their house, a mocked-up exterior with pillars and three steps leading to the front door. The door could be opened but led only onto a small platform inside, five feet off the ground. With only enough room for two people on the platform, it was decided that the maid would open the door and step back quickly. An assistant would help her down, leaving enough room for the two leading actors to sweep inside. It was such a simple shot, but they had to do take after take to get it right, and Pike was losing patience.

In the next scene, Amanda is running from the house in terror. She crosses the road in an attempt to escape, tries to hail a horse-drawn Hansom cab and, failing to do so, is almost run over by a carriage. There were rain machines, and flash lighting to depict lightning; the sound of thunder would be laid on afterwards. As the fog, generated by smoke machines, became thicker, Amanda had to collide with the very man she was afraid of. Then she had to scream. Nothing went smoothly: the horses got skittish with the flash lighting; one take was ruined as the smoke machine made Amanda start coughing. There were altercations between Amanda and the uptight director. By now she was freezing cold.

The costume department were having a hard time keeping the mud off Amanda's dress, with its heavy hooped velvet skirt and boned corset, and the ringlets were dropping out of her wig. Amanda and the director then had yet another stand-up argument, both shouting at each other in front of the entire crew.

When the time came for the close-up of Amanda screaming, she was in such a bad temper, the scream

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sounded more like one of anger than of terror. The director yelled at her to try and do the scream she'd heard the night before. Finally he called it quits for the night, even though he knew he hadn't got the sound he wanted. He told Amanda to have a good night's sleep; she would be wanted on set for the first shot of the day and he needed her in a better mood.

Amanda, with her usual driver, did not get home until four-thirty the next morning. By this time, she was exhausted. The tight corset and heavy hooped skirt had given her backache, and she had a headache from trying to scream. She was also feeling chilled, as it had been so cold on set and the rain effects had soaked her through to the skin. She sat hunched in the back of the Mercedes on the drive home, saying little. Her driver had helped her from the car and walked her to her front door, making sure she was inside before he drove away. As he reversed, his headlights caught her opening her front door; she turned and waved to him. He was struck by her beauty. Tired as she was, with her make-up wiped off and her face pale, she had almost a translucent quality. She gave him the sweetest of smiles.

The same unit driver returned later to collect her for the end of the night shoot. They would then, thankfully, have the weekend off before returning to the usual daily schedule. It had been a long hard shoot and a few more days remained before they wrapped. The driver rang the doorbell and returned to sit in the car. He waited ten minutes. Often she would keep him outside for even longer; he was used to giving her about twenty minutes. After half an hour, he called her landline and got the answer machine. When he called her mobile phone and she didn't pick up, he rang the unit to say he was outside

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Amanda's mews house but could not get any response.

The make-up and hair departments were getting impatient. It took at least two hours to do make-up and fit the wig. Then the costume designer appeared, asking for Amanda. She was to wear a very elaborate gown that required not only a corset, but they would need to hand-stitch her into it. The first assistant joined them, hoping that Amanda might have driven herself, as they still had not made contact with her at her home.

Julian Pike flew into a rage. He had a heavy schedule, but at least he would be able to start filming the only scene that did not require Amanda. Her driver was instructed to keep knocking on her door and, as the actors prepared to film the first scene, the production assistant called Amanda's agent. Concerned, the latter said she would drive herself to the mews as she had a spare key.

Two hours later, Amanda's stunt double was dressed in her costume; the director had made the decision to shoot around any close-ups, so the filming could continue. He was heard to say that they would probably be better off without the 'bitch'.

The bitch was lying naked on her new bed. Her hands were tied and her legs spread out, and the blood from multiple stab wounds had stained the sheets in hideous thick pools. Her shocked agent stood frozen as she saw the awful tableau. It was obvious that Amanda Delany had been brutally murdered. Her beautiful face was unmarked, her eyes wide open.

