

Desolation

Travers and Palumbo Book 1

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Chapter 1

On a warm Sunday morning in mid-November, 1991, Sue Edwards pulled into the driveway of the house in Essex Street, Burra, that she shared with her seventeen-year-old daughter, Jane. Sue was feeling good. She'd spent the night in Clare with Kevin Marshall, the new man in her life. The first night she'd spent with a man since her husband had died when Jane was a five-year old.

She wondered what Jane and her boyfriend, eighteen-year-old Andrew White, thought about her finally giving in to Kevin and shook her head. What did it matter? The kids these days didn't wait for anything or anyone's approval. Jane and Andrew had been at it since the start of the school year, ever since they'd decided they were a couple going places. They'd told her about their big plans that didn't include spending the rest of their lives in Burra.

Sue knew she was going to miss them once they went off to university in Adelaide at the end of summer, but she had her own life to live. Maybe Kevin's recent arrival in her life had been more than just good timing. Perhaps it was the universe's way of looking after her. She liked being looked after.

It had been a struggle bringing up Jane on her own, even with the life insurance money. At least she'd been able to pay off the mortgage and buy a new car. Not things she'd have been able to do otherwise on her wages.

Sue looked at the house. Built of local stone, it had stood for eighty years and would no doubt be still standing long after she'd gone. The garden looked like it could use a drink and there were a few dry weeds visible over the edge of the gutter at the front of the house. Something she'd need to attend to soon or at least ask Kevin to do something about.

The curtains were still drawn in Jane's room. Sue looked at her watch. It was ten past eleven. Jane was an early riser, even when Andrew stayed over, and neither of them drank much. She wondered if they'd decided to spend the night at Andrew's house after all.

Sue slipped out of the car, retrieved her overnight bag from the back seat, and made her way around to the back door. It was locked. She inserted her key into the lock, opened the door, and

stepped into the mudroom at the rear of the house. Andrew's overnight bag was still on the table by the door where he'd placed it when he'd arrived the previous evening.

A tingle of concern wriggled along Sue's spine. She opened the door into the corridor that bisected the length of the house. Sunlight streamed through the stained glass panes of the front door onto the hardwood floorboards of the passageway. The only sound was the thud of her overnight bag landing on the floor.

The door to Jane's room was open. Sue stopped in the doorway, half expecting to see them entangled in the bedclothes. The bed was empty. It looked like it hadn't been slept in. There were no clothes strewn about the room. Jane's keys were not on her bedside table.

'Jane!'

No answer. She walked back along the corridor to the kitchen to see whether Jane had left her a note stuck on the fridge under her angel magnet. They had one each and never left the house without leaving a message about where they were going on the fridge door. Sue's blue angel was there, holding the piece of paper with the contact details of the motel where she and Kevin had spent the night. Next to it, Jane's green angel still held the invitation to the end of school year party at Sally Nelson's.

Obviously they hadn't come back to the house after the party. Sue went into the hallway, lifted the telephone out of its cradle on the wall and punched in the White's number.

'Hi, Cynthia. Are the kids there?'

'Aren't they at your place?'

'I just got in from Clare. There's nobody here, and Jane's bed hasn't been slept in. Thought they must have decided to sleep at your place.'

'Well, they're not here. Maybe they're still at the Nelsons', said Cynthia. 'Perhaps it turned into a sleepover.'

Sue felt the weight lift from her chest. 'Didn't think of that.'

'How was Clare?' says Cynthia.

'Tell you all about it tonight,' said Sue, picturing Cynthia leaning on the bench in the hospital kitchen as they prepared that evening's meals for the aged care residents who made up the bulk of the hospital's patients.

Sue ended the call, retrieved the party invitation from under Jane's fridge magnet, and punched in the digits Sally Nelson had printed on it.

'Oh, hello, Mrs Edwards.'

'Sally, is Jane there?'

‘What?’

‘She’s not here and she’s not at Andrew’s. I was wondering if they slept over at your place.’

‘They left here around midnight.’

* * *

Sue was at a loss. Where could they be? It wasn’t like they’d get lost on the way home. It was only a ten minute walk from the Nelsons’ in Welsh Place around to her house in Essex Street, and none of it along the highway that snaked its way through Burra. They didn’t even have to cross Burra Creek or walk through the main part of town.

She called Kevin.

‘I don’t know what to do, Kev. There’s no sign of the kids and no-one seems to know where they are.’

‘Who have you called?’ said Kevin.

‘She hasn’t been home,’ said Sue, not hearing his question.

‘I’ll be right over.’

While she waited for Kevin to arrive, Sue called the Owens’ number. Rebecca and Jane had been best friends ever since they’d started school.

‘Becky, do you know where Jane is?’

‘Haven’t heard from her since last night. Is something wrong?’

‘I don’t know where she is.’

‘She said they were going to your place when we were leaving the party,’ said Rebecca. ‘Dad offered them a lift but they said they’d walk.’

‘Who else was at the party?’ said Sue.

‘Only Lydia, but her Mum picked her up around eleven. They were going down to Adelaide today.’

‘Can you call me if you hear anything?’

‘Sure, Mrs Edwards.’

Sue pictured the group, the four girls and Andrew, who called themselves ‘The Book Club’. They were the academically inclined members of their year twelve class with aspirations of going to university and escaping the small town confines of Burra. The group had become close, especially over the last couple of years in which they had attracted some unwanted attention from some of their less academically inclined classmates.

Andrew especially had had a rough time of it in a schoolyard where sporting prowess and animal magnetism were held in higher regard than academic success. It hadn’t helped that he was

the son of a townie and had four girlfriends, one of whom was the most popular senior girl at Burra Community School.

Sue hoped they hadn't become the unwitting victims of one last school year prank.

* * *

Kevin listened to Sue's concerns. He'd only met Andrew and Jane a couple of weeks ago and they'd struck him as sensible kids.

'This is so unlike her,' said Sue. 'She knows I worry if I don't know where she is.'

'There will be an explanation,' said Kevin. 'There always is.'

They heard car doors slam and the crunch of boots on the gravel driveway.

'Maybe that's them,' said Kevin.

But it wasn't. Michael and Cynthia White came in through the back door.

'Anything?' said Michael. 'Cynthia's beside herself.'

'I don't know what to think,' said Cynthia. 'He's never done anything like this before.'

They stood looking at each other across Sue's kitchen table.

'I think we should talk to the police,' said Kevin. 'They'll know what to do.'

'Are you sure?' said Michael.

'They'll at least know how to arrange a search,' said Kevin.