

Distraction

Travers and Palumbo Book 2

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Chapter 1

Dr Sam Taylor had spent a long Monday doing what he could to keep the desperately ill Covid patients under his care alive. Exhausted, he exited the hospital at the end of his shift looking forward to a good night's sleep, before having to come back and do it all again.

In the fog of his tiredness, the eighteen kilometre drive to his home in High Street, Stirling, seemed to take forever. In reality, it took him a little over thirty minutes, like it did most nights.

Sam pulled into the driveway of the house, nestled among a forest of towering eucalyptus trees on the outskirts of Stirling, one of the older settlements in the hills east of Adelaide. They'd bought the place for its secluded location three years ago when he'd secured his position at Flinders, the main hospital servicing the southern suburbs. He pressed the button on the remote resting in the well of the centre console and waited for the roller door to lift, before driving into the double garage at the front of the house.

As he listened to the roller door closing, Sam sensed that something wasn't quite right. His wife's car was parked in its usual spot but the door leading into the house was open, and the interior of the house through the open doorway was in darkness. Sarah always shut that door - they had a four-year old daughter.

Sam walked into the hallway and flicked on the lights. 'Ella! Daddy's home!'

He waited for Ella to come running into his arms as she did most nights when he announced his arrival home from work. There was no sound of movement from within the house.

'Sarah?'

Silence. What were they up to? Were they planning some sort of surprise for him? It wouldn't be the first time they'd done something unexpected to welcome him home from a stress filled day at work.

Sam walked down the corridor turning on lights and peering into rooms as he went, half expecting them to appear from their hiding place. There was no sign of them, apart from the backpack Ella took with her to kindergarten sitting on the kitchen bench.

Standing in the living area, he checked his phone for messages in case he'd missed one from Sarah. Nothing. He called her number and heard what sounded like her phone ringing from somewhere outside. They must be hiding out on the alfresco. He could almost see the frown forming on Sarah's face, knowing she'd be disappointed he'd resorted to ringing her phone, instead of waiting for them to spring their surprise.

He turned on the lights that illuminated the alfresco dining area at the rear of the house and stepped outside through the sliding glass door, expecting them to shout: 'Surprise!' But there was no shouting. There was only an involuntary gasp when he spotted Sarah, sprawled on her back next to the garden bed with a startled look on her face.

Instinctively, Sam bent to check Sarah's body for a pulse, knowing he wasn't going to find one. He'd seen enough dead bodies to know she wasn't alive the moment he'd spotted her lying on the paving stones. Her neck was cold to his touch. He pulled his hand away, sank to his knees and screamed. After the day he'd had fighting to save lives, coming home to this was just too much to bear.

After a few moments lost in absolute anguish, Sam got to his feet slowly and looked around. What in God's name had happened? Had she tripped and hit her head? It didn't make sense. Sarah was athletic. She had a great sense of balance. She didn't go around tripping over herself.

Sam realised he might be going into shock. He couldn't let himself do that. He took a couple of deep breaths and told himself to stay calm. He had to find Ella. Where was she? She must be frightened. She would have been at home alone for hours, going by the temperature of Sarah's body.

'Ella! It's Daddy! Where are you?'

No response. Not even a sniffle.

He ran into the darkness of the yard, beyond the reach of the light illuminating the alfresco, calling her name. He crashed into the wheelbarrow he'd left in the garden on the weekend and tumbled into the remains of their summer vegetables.

He dusted himself off and went inside to get the torch he kept in the laundry, then returned and searched the yard calling her name until his voice was hoarse. There was no sign of her. Perhaps she had wandered off into the forest surrounding the house in an attempt to get help from one of the neighbours.

Sam didn't know what to think. Sarah was dead and Ella was nowhere to be found. He leant against a tree, fighting back tears of desperation.

Realising he'd need help if he was to find Ella, he pulled out his phone and called his father-in-law: the Police Commissioner.

