

The Sydney Dahlia



A.J. Sendall

The Sydney Dahlia

It was the third time I'd caught her looking at me. This time I held her gaze for a five-beat before turning back to the barman and holding my glass up for a refill.

'One more for the road, Sam?' he asked.

'Sure, and one for the nosey kid in the black and white shirt,' I said, tipping my head towards her.

Eddie took my glass and pushed it against an optic, waited for the sight-glass to drain and did it again. He laid the tumbler in front of me, and said, 'You'll need this double if you're going to tangle with her.'

'Why, who is she?'

Without answering he poured a single malt into a crystal tumbler, walked away and laid the tumbler in front of her, then leaned forward and spoke in a low voice. She turned her head, studied me, then turned away again. She was in her mid-twenties, slightly built with a soft, attractive face free of makeup. What possible interest she could have in a hack journalist old enough to be her father.

Fat Eddie had been running the bar at The Dog and Duck for as long as I could recall. We weren't friends other than when I was drinking and he was serving, and he'd probably served me more drinks than any other barman in Kings Cross. I called in there a couple of times a week, but I didn't remember ever seeing the young woman before. From Eddie's comment and his interaction with her, I guessed he knew her.

After serving two beers at the far end, he walked back to where I was perched on a stool. He wiped the bar with a cloth even though it was already clean and dry.

‘Anything you want to tell me, Eddie?’

He looked squarely at me for a moment, then said, ‘She’s trouble.’ He hung the cloth, then laid out beer mats in preparation for new customers.

‘Trouble how? Good trouble or bad?’

He turned his back to her, leaned an elbow on the bar, and said, ‘You know Luis Two-step?’

‘Tall guy with a funny shuffling walk and stooped shoulders?’

‘Right. Well, she was Luis’s girl.’ His eyes held mine making sure I understood.

‘How’d she shake free of him?’

‘Good question. Luis’s in tight with the Lebanese and they don’t let nobody go. My guess is that Luis’s not happy about it.’ He let his words sink in for a moment then said in a lowered voice, ‘Be careful, Sam, these are some heavy hitters.’ He walked away, like he was nervous about telling me what little he had.

Eddie’s attitude, and what he’d just told me raised my curiosity, so I turned and looked around as if casually surveying the bar, wanting to take a closer look at this woman who’d dumped a member of the Sydney underworld. That would take a lot of balls or friends further up the food chain, so she was either reckless or protected. From her looks, I’d guess the latter.

When I turned to face her she was no longer there. Five minutes later she hadn’t returned. I guessed it wasn’t a call to the ladies, and that she’d gone. I shrugged it off and concentrated on smoking, drinking, and casting an eye toward the muted TV.

Ten minutes later I pushed through the door into the wet September night. It was eleven-thirty, and on most Friday nights at that time the Golden Mile of Kings Cross would be humming, but the cold winter rain had reduced the crowd to a few dozen diehards rather than several hundred revellers.

Cold rain ran down my neck. I cursed the winter, bowed my head and strode toward William Street, keeping one eye raised for a cab.

'Taxi!' I waved my arm and yelled too loud, drawing attention from a few of the damp tourists and a guy working the door of a nightclub. The silver Falcon swerved into the kerb, its wipers throwing a spray of rain at me as it pulled to a stop. I yanked open the back door feeling lucky to have found a cab so quickly, then I realised it wasn't luck.

I slid onto the back seat, pulled the door shut, pushed the water from my hair, and said, 'If we're going to share a cab I should know your name.'

She continued to stare at me as the cab pulled back into the traffic and continued along Darlington Road. 'Eddie didn't tell you?'

I raised a wet eyebrow. 'If he did I wouldn't be asking you. I don't play mind games.'

'No, I heard you're a straight shooter.' She lowered her eyes. 'Sorry, I didn't mean it like that. I need to talk with you.'

'What else did you hear that made you curious enough to kidnap me this way?'

Without hesitation she said, 'I heard you're a journalist who has a conscience. I also heard you say what you think – tell it how it is. That you're your own man.'

'Is that why you kept looking at me back at the bar, curiosity about an honest journo? Or were you waiting for me to make a fool of myself

trying to pick up a good-looking woman half my age?’ A short nervous snort escaped, like she’d been keeping it bottled up. Beneath the streetwise attitude she was in turmoil. ‘And you still haven’t told me your name,’ I said.

She looked away, but the side window reflected her sadness. ‘It’s Monica.’

‘Okay, Monica, what do you want?’ Before she had time to answer I cut her off. ‘Wait, let me guess. You have a story to tell about your grubby underworld friends, about life as a moll. Is that it?’

Her jaw set and her eyes hardened. The sadness was gone. I didn’t call her a moll to be rude, but to find out what she wanted to say. To needle it out of her. I didn’t have time or interest to play word games in a cab on a rainy night with a woman connected to a mid-level underworld hoodlum named Luis Two-step. Didn’t matter how cute she was.

‘Are you always so rude when you first meet someone?’ Her tone was more curious, than angry or offended, and I noticed for the first time that her voice was refined as opposed to street-side, which is what I was expecting.

‘Only if I think I am being jerked around. What do you want from me, Monica?’

She buried her emotion behind a cockeyed know-it-all smile, as if the whole world was a joke, particularly me. When she hadn’t said anything after five seconds I decided she was just another Kings Cross head-case. I leaned forward in my seat, told the cab driver to pull over. He did as I asked but left the meter running. I turned and looked at her, shrugged, and said, ‘Well?’

She lost the pasted smile. ‘I’ve something for you. An exclusive. But not here. I can’t talk about it here.’

Like any veteran journalist, I'd heard that line a hundred times before. If it hadn't been for Eddie telling me about her connection to Luis Two-step, I'd have been back in the rain looking for an empty cab.

My hand dropped from the door handle. I said, 'Then where can you talk?'

The cab driver sat passively, the wipers flicked rain, and I didn't know whether to get out into the wet night or go along for the ride and see what she had. When a heavy rain squall hammered the windscreen I leaned back in the seat. 'Okay, one hour. It's all I have.'

For a brief moment victory flashed across her eyes, then was gone. She told the driver to take us to Mosman Marina. The cab pulled back into the traffic, I rubbed at midnight eyes wondering if I'd be doing this if she wasn't so easy to look at.

Twenty minutes later the cab dropped us at the marina carpark. We walked to the head of the dock where she opened a security gate with a swipe card taken from her purse. Three quarters of the way down the dock she turned onto one of the fingers and stepped aboard a red hulled yacht about forty feet long.

'This yours?' I asked.

'I wish. It belongs to a friend. I use it sometimes when I want to be alone.'

I followed her below into the saloon where she flicked on the red overhead light used for night sailing. The dim red glow was just enough to see, and I wondered if she'd used it for dramatic effect. I removed my coat and looked around for somewhere to put it. There was a brass hook beside the companionway steps, so I hung it there and let it drip onto the varnished teak grate below.

She lit a cigarette and let it dangle from her lips as she cleared magazines and a laptop from the table, then took a bottle from one locker, two glasses from another and poured drinks without asking if I wanted one. She laid them on the saloon table and sat on the port-side sofa watching me as I sat opposite her.

Keeping the cynicism out of my voice, I said, 'What have you got, Monica? What's the exclusive you have for me?'

After a long moment during which she seemed to be forming her reply, she said, 'Did Eddie tell you I used to hang out with Luis Two-step?' When I didn't answer she went on. 'Luis reacted badly when I left him. It'd be fair to say he's royally pissed and will have me rubbed unless I get away from here. So—'

'—And to get out of here you need a fat pay cheque for your story. Am I right?' She didn't answer, just picked up one of the glasses and swallowed half the whiskey. 'One thing you have to understand right now, Monica, is that if you've got anything significant, and if I'm interested, you'll have to stay local and answer lots of questions. It's not just a case of—'

'—I've written it all down. Everything. Names. Places.' She lowered her eyes. 'All the dark, ugly details.'

'Sounds as if you've been planning this for a while.' She didn't respond, so I asked. 'Where will you go?'

She drained the glass, placed it carefully on the varnished table, then shrugged and said, 'Overseas. Somewhere laid-back. The Caribbean, maybe.'

'In this?' I said spreading my arms.

She smiled properly for the first time, opened her mouth to say something, but before she could, the boat rocked to port as if someone had just stepped onto the side-deck.

We both felt it. The blood left her cheeks, and when her eyes met mine they were tense with fear. I put a finger to my lips, then moved from the salon into the darkness of the small forward cabin. I opened the overhead hatch just enough to get my eyes at deck level. The foredeck was clear. I scanned the port side-deck, then flinched at the unmistakable sound of a silenced handgun. I froze, unable to tell if the sound had come from inside or out. All I could hear was the pulsing in my temple. A second or two later the boat rocked again, followed by the sound of quick footsteps on the wharf. I raised my head again until I could see out. The only movement was the taillights of a car turning left out of the carpark. It was too far to get the make, never mind a colour or number plate.

When I looked back into the salon, Monica was slumped on the sofa. Blood was trickling from a small, dark hole in her forehead, then running through her right eye and down her nose.

The cops arrived seven minutes after I called it in. I'd already left the boat and was sitting on a bench at the head of the dock. Two patrol cars were first to arrive. One cop wanted to cuff me but was told not to be a jerk by another. They started to secure the crime scene.

Five minutes later I heard another car come to a rapid stop, and turned to see two men get out of an unmarked car. I recognised one of them as DS Matt Rickman, an honest, if somewhat cynical cop. He made arrests, looked out for his mates and provided for his wife and four kids. Our paths had crossed many times in the past when I was working as crime reporter for the *Mosman Daily*.

They walked over to me. Rickman said, 'What are you doing here, Autenburg? You smell blood?'

'Fucking reporters,' his partner said, then turned away, ducked under the crime scene tape and walked down the dock.

'Good to see you, too, Rickman. And no, I didn't smell blood, I saw it. I'm not here as a reporter, I'm your witness.'

His eyebrows arched, his shoulders hitched, then he said, 'Do you want to tell me what happened here, Sam, or do you want to go to the station and have your lawyer present?'

'I don't need a lawyer, Rickman, I've nothing to hide.'

'Sorry, Sam,' he said with deliberate insincerity. 'Bad time to be riding you when your girl's just been shot. How are you feeling?'

'She wasn't my girl, Rickman. And don't try to finesse me, you're not up to it. Never have been, never will be.'

'So what then? A hooker? Your long-lost daughter?'

I ignored the bait, pulled a pack of cigarettes from my pocket and lit up. After two deep, satisfying draws, I said, 'How come they sent you, Rickman? She's dead, not missing.'

'Perhaps you didn't hear, maybe you're out of touch, but I moved up from missing persons to murder investigations a couple of years ago.'

'Good for you, Rickman,' I said without enthusiasm.

He looked down at me for a long moment, then sat beside me on the bench and in a conciliatory tone said, 'Come on, Sam, let's cut the banter and bullshit. Tell me what happened.'

I told him, leaving out what Fat Eddie had told me about Monica being Luis Two-step's girlfriend, and the part about her having a story to sell. He listened without making notes or interrupting.

'And that's all you saw? Taillights disappearing?'

'That's all. After that I came up here and called it in.'

He pulled at his chin as if deep in thought, then tipped his head and ran his fingers through his oiled and greying hair. 'The thing I'm not seeing, is why a good-looking twenty-five-year-old would pick you up in a bar in Kings Cross and take you to a yacht. No disrespect, Sam, but it doesn't sound likely, does it? What was she after? I mean, she must have said something. Why you?'

'Like I told you, Rickman, she seemed to want to talk about being a journo. Who knows? Maybe she had aspirations herself. We didn't get that far before someone drilled her forehead.'

Just after dawn I left Mosman Police Station where Rickman had taken my formal statement. I went straight back to my apartment, made tea, and then sat in the window-seat smoking, drinking, and thinking about Monica until well after dark.

Ten o'clock that night I returned to the marina and recovered Monica's laptop, which I'd taken from the yacht before the cops arrived, and hidden in a plastic bag beneath a thick shrub at the back of the carpark. I jammed it into my empty laptop case and walked away in the shadows.

As soon as I got home I removed the laptop's hard drive and connected it to my computer via a USB. I figured she'd have passwords on the files, so I ran a piece of software to find recently saved password protected documents, then poured a glass of Laphroaig, added some water and waited.

Before I was halfway down the glass I got a hit. The file name was a string of random characters and numbers. I started up a cracking tool I'd used in the past when I'd forgotten my own passwords, and set it to work. I

topped up my glass, slipped a movie into the player and lay down on the sofa.

It was six-thirty the following morning when I woke to find the cursor blinking after the words, 'crack successful'. I opened the file and started reading. After skimming the document for less than five minutes I had to stop, take a deep breath, and take stock. Then I sat at my desk and started reading again from the beginning.

It was all there, the connections between criminal entities, bent cops, who ran what and where. It would have taken Monica months, years even, to get all that information. The overwhelming question was why, and why give it to me? Why not the cops if she wanted to do a deal? Maybe she didn't know who to trust and came to me in desperation. Or maybe she'd approached a cop only to find out they were on some hood's payroll, and she'd been living on borrowed time ever since. Which lead to the question – does Luis know what she'd been doing?

I stood and paced, then stopped and looked down at the street, wondering how much danger this was putting me in. What if Rickman was on the take and he tells Luis Two-step that I was with her when she was killed. I'd always thought Rickman was straight, but who knows any cop that well. Who really knows anything about anyone at this level? What if the gunman had recognized me? If they had any idea she'd been writing down all of their dirty little secrets, they'd soon put two and two together and come for me next.

After checking there were no more files I'd need on the drive, I copied the protected document to my laptop, then destroyed Monica's hard drive with a hammer. Three minutes later I left the apartment with both laptops and an overnight bag.

Annie's Place was a secluded motel four hours north of Sydney. It was no more than a few old wooden huts with deep verandas set beside a lake, but it was where I always went to find solitude, and in this instance, safety as well. The owners greeted me like an old friend. They were as ancient and rustic as the cabins. They gave me my usual spot, and then left me alone.

I switched on my laptop and waited for it to boot up. Monica's computer I'd ditched in a dumpster at a parking bay north of the city. For the remainder of the day I read, then re-read the thirty-two explosive pages. It centred around the unsolved murder of Sonja Hartman, a twenty-two-year-old underworld groupie. Her murder had drawn lots of press coverage, TV, too. It wasn't just because she was an attractive and vulnerable young woman, but because her body was found in two pieces like it had been torn in half. The press soon labelled her The Sydney Dahlia after Elizabeth Short, whose body was found in a similar state in LA in 1947. The LA press had nicknamed her The Black Dahlia, and she was later immortalised by James Ellroy in his novel of the same name. Elizabeth Short's murder was never solved; neither was Sonja Hartman's.

Investigating something like this was way out of my league. For a while I considered handing it over to the cops – but who? There were so many bent cops named in the document that I didn't have faith in anyone, not even Rickman who I'd always thought was straight. He wasn't named, but other cops who I knew he'd worked with were. Some came as no surprise, with others I was gob-smacked. I had to assume they were all tainted, anything else was suicide. Another consideration was that if I went to the cops, I'd probably be charged with tampering with a crime scene and withholding evidence. Who knows what else.

I went out onto the veranda, sat on a rickety chair and lit a cigarette. It was an hour before dark and I had some serious thinking to do. I now knew who'd ordered Sonja Hartman to be killed, and how it should be done. Who did the actual killing came down to three men, all equally guilty in my book. What did it matter which one tied her legs around a tree, which one put a chain around her chest and bound her arms to her sides with gaffer tape, or which one drove the car that pulled her in two? They were all guilty and needed to burn.

What was missing was the reason – the motive. And now Monica was dead there was no witness either. Not that she'd witnessed the murder, but she had – according to her report – heard them planning it, talking about it both before and after the act.

And there was more than Sonja Hartman's murder, so much more. This would blow the lid off the nastiest crock of maggots in Australia. I'd never get a bigger story than this. I could name my price. It was a career piece, but one that would get me killed if my name was on it. The whistling kettle cut into my thoughts.

I made tea and returned to the veranda, my head filling with the obvious, swirling with possibilities as I walked back outside. Since becoming a journalist at age twenty-two I'd always wanted to write fiction. Always wanted time to explore the words and worlds that so often occupied my head. I gazed unblinking across the lake as the pieces formed and aligned in my mind. I opened a new document and started writing.

Twenty months after my brief encounter with Monica, I was sitting behind a small table in a bookstore in Melbourne. It was my first book signing, my first public appearance as Johnny Silk. I felt self-conscious, an imposter,

because all I'd done was plagiarized Monica's story. I hadn't invented or created it. But I'd used what she'd started, written the story and got it published without getting killed. I'd changed the names of the guilty in such a way that anyone from that murky underworld, or any of those bent cops would know. They'd recognise themselves. It was my parting shot, my salute to Monica, to Sonja Hartman, to all the others. It was as far as I dared go.

The literary agent loved it, the publishers enthused about it, and most important of all, there was no connection between the fictitious Johnny Silk and the missing, presumed dead and unlamented Sam Autenburg. I'd also changed my image with a full beard, heavy rimmed glasses and re-styled hair, sub-consciously modelling myself on a young Stephen King, complete with tweed jacket. All I had to do now was sit back and let the money roll in.

My new image and lifestyle felt good – it had been time to change my old, stale life. What didn't feel good was knowing it took the deaths of two young women to get me there. Some days it was hard to look in the mirror.

My palms were sweating, and I kept my eyes low pretending to do writerly things on an A4 notepad, only occasionally glancing up to see if a crowd was building. It wasn't, but it was only nine-fifteen and the show ran until two in the afternoon. When I sensed someone approach, and then stop in front of me, I wrote two more important words followed by a heavy-handed period, then looked up and smiled at my first fan. My throat was dry, like it was filled with sand. His expressionless eyes held mine as he slid a copy of *The Sydney Dahlia* across the table with his fingertips. 'Would you sign this for me please, Mr Silk? The name's Luis.'

I hope you enjoyed reading this short story. Continue reading to find out about some of my full length novels.

The Sydney Quartet

Flank Street

When Micky DeWitt sails into Sydney, Australia, his only assets are a run-down yacht, his wits, and the skills he's picked up as a dedicated career criminal.

Shiftless, cynical and dishonest, even with himself, Micky takes a job as a barman in Sydney's red light district. He's a chameleon, seeing himself as both master criminal and chilled-out world sailor. He wants a life on Easy Street, is driven by the desire to 'get away with it,' and addicted to the adrenaline rush that comes with that life.

Carol Todd is turned on by money and risk-taking. For Carol, there's no such thing as "enough". Being an escort to a few wealthy clients is just a means to an end. A couple of underworld connections help, too. But what she needs for her latest con is a fall guy — someone she can use and lose once she's done with him. And Micky DeWitt looks like the perfect man to fall into her sultry, seductive honey trap.

Playing to Micky's twisted sense of chivalry, Carol leads him into a hedonistic free-fall. As Micky's life spins out of control it doesn't take long

to graduate from burglary to arson, then accessory to murder. And no matter which way he moves, someone's going to get hurt... or die.

What readers are saying:

"Suspenseful, pithy, unpredictable, and laced with black humour, Flank Street perfectly captures the mood of Sydney's criminal underworld."

"Bloody bold, and brilliant!"

"The dialogue is short, sharp, and terse, with just the right amount of street talk to make Flank Street a compelling read for fans of hard-boiled crime fiction."

"This book is a page-turner for anyone who likes noir thrillers/mysteries."

Awarded the AIA Seal of Excellence for Outstanding Fiction, and the prestigious B.R.A.G. Medallion, Flank street is an unforgettable novel from *"One of the most distinct and exciting new voices in crime writing."*

Download your copy here - <http://mybook.to/FlankStreet>

Meet Me at Harry's

Amazon review - "Brilliantly plotted book. Keeps up the suspense all the way. Never sure if Nick can trust Stacia and vice versa. In the background is the dangerous Ray Peterson and the atmospheric Kings Cross area of Sydney."

Ex-Detective Lieutenant Stacia Black, formerly of the Chicago Police Department, knows all about violence and poverty. She grew up with it. As a cop working for the Organized Crime Division's Narcotics section, she

fought against it. Maybe she's been on the wrong side all these years. The side that stays poor while others get rich. Now she's in Sydney's notorious Kings Cross, looking to make a score of her own. What she needs is a man with connections.

Something of a loner, quiet and cynical Nick Miller has been content to run a bar and stay out of trouble until Stacia appears, looking to make a deal with the head of organised crime—the boss of Kings Cross. Nick's no criminal, but he knows people. People like underworld enforcer Ray Peterson.

Nick is balanced on a knife's edge, torn between his loyalties to his acquaintances and his hunger for something better. He steps off the edge, straight into a world of danger and deceit, where the only thing that matters is making it out alive.

Can a dishonest American cop teach Nick to live again, or will she get him killed?

Can they stay out of jail, stay alive, and stay together?

Find out in this tense, fast paced thriller - <http://mybook.to/MMAH>

Cerise Noire

Six months after his partner was murdered, Rick Stone returns to Sydney trying to pull his life back together. While he was away, two more women were murdered, each seemingly unrelated to the others. When a third woman is murdered in the same way, and Rick gets caught up in the

investigation, he becomes obsessed with finding a link between the murders.

Each night, Joy Stringer steps outside the quiet orderliness of her day job, and hangs out in bars and clubs in Sydney's Kings Cross to gather material for a book she's always wanted to write. After one of her main sources of information dies, she fears for her own safety.

When Joy and Rick meet in a bar one night, they discover that by pooling information and working together, they can help each other achieve their goal. That decision leads them into more danger than they could ever imagine, and to an outcome that nobody could foresee.

"A great psycho - thriller - whodunit novel from one of the best Crime / Thriller writers I know."

"A great plot that'll keep you turning pages well into the night. The Rick Stone PI is very Chandleresque, echoes of the Sam Spade ripostes run through the dialogue making this a really cool novel to read."

"Great descriptions, locations and characters round this off as a truly great novel. Good fun !!"

Find out for yourself - <http://mybook.to/CeriseNoire>

Shadow House

Heather Todd's life had never been easy, but when her sister died as a result of overcut cocaine, everything changed. Now she's determined to take down Sydney's notorious organized crime ring, vowing to ensure her sister didn't die in vain.

Ex MI6 operative turned world sailor, Sam Autenburg is on a bender after his partner died, also as a result of overcut cocaine. When one night things go desperately wrong for Sam, Heather comes to his rescue.

Taunting and goading him, she eventually convinces him to take on her cause and infiltrate the organized crime syndicate responsible for her sister's, and his partner's, deaths. Going after the brutal gang will be no easy feat, and in order to stop them, Sam and Heather must put their own lives on the line.

Together in loss and driven by revenge, Sam and Heather hunt for justice, and in doing so, begin their own path to redemption.

Can they find the evidence they need without getting caught?

Are they strong enough to take on this fight without losing themselves in the process?

Find out in this action-packed thriller, filled with daring adventure and high-risk operations! - <http://mybook.to/ShadowHouse>

About the author

Although I grew up in Norfolk, UK, I never felt truly at home until I lived in Australia, and that is no doubt the reason my first published novels are set there. All of my books this far have some element of truth in them. I guess it's hard for any writer not to include events from their life. Our experiences shape our thoughts and the words and actions of our

characters. I sometimes wish I'd become a novelist earlier in life, but then if I had, I wouldn't have the range of characters and events that I do.

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