

ALASTAIR
SARRRE

A Steve West novel

ECSTASY
LAKE



Wakefield Press

ECSTASY LAKE

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Ecstasy Lake is his second novel.

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Wakefield Press
16 Rose Street
Mile End
South Australia 5031
www.wakefieldpress.com.au

First published 2016

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Cover designed by Liz Nicholson, designBITE
Edited by Julia Beaven, Wakefield Press
Text designed and typeset by Wakefield Press
Printed in Australia by Griffin Digital, Adelaide

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Creator: Sarre, Alastair, 1963– , author.
Title: Ecstasy Lake: a Steve West novel / Alastair Sarre.
ISBN: 978 1 74305 396 6 (paperback).
Subjects: Gold mines and mining – Australia – Fiction.
Murder – Fiction.
Suspense fiction.
Dewey Number: A823.4


CORIOLE
MCLAREN VALE

For Judy and the boys

|

We flew in over the low woods of the Mount Lofty Ranges, hazy, lazy and ready to burn. The city lounged between the hills and the blue tongue of the Gulf, the Torrens Island power station stacks standing like forgotten survey pegs at the edge of the salt pans. I was on the right-hand side of the plane and had a fine view of the northern suburbs, which sprawled along the seaboard until I couldn't tell where the houses stopped and the dust began. Adelaide: a staid but strangely tortured place that was poorer and drier than most Australian cities and pretended to be more righteous, but which had its fair share of dark secrets and psychopaths. We shot out over the Gulf, banked, and landed from the west over the Norfolk Island pines at Glenelg. I hadn't been home for two years.

My half-brother Luke was grinning at the top of the ramp as we disembarked. He hugged me and then held me at arm's length and looked at me.

'You're starting to look old.'

'It's just the jet lag, you cheeky bugger. You're starting to look respectable.' Not long ago he had been a dope-smoking, binge-drinking university student; now he was dressed half-decently and had shorn his scruffy beard into fashionable stubble. His grin had faded.

'It's good to see you,' I said.

'It's good to see you, too, man. There's some bad news, though. You remember Mick Hiskey?'

'Yeah. What about him?'

'He's dead.'

'Dead?' Other disembarking passengers were moving past, but they were only blurs to me.

'Yeah. Sorry.'

'What happened?'

'The cops say he was murdered.'

'Murdered?'

'Yeah. Here in Adelaide. Yesterday.'

'Jesus. How is that possible?'

'Don't know.' He looked at me as we rode the escalator down to the luggage carousel. Luke liked to know how people were feeling. I wasn't feeling much of anything. It was the jet lag. 'There's something else, but it's good news.'

'What is it?'

'Tasso's in town. He wants to see you.'

'I know. Why do you think I've come back?'

'To see your brother, I thought.'

'Sure, that too. But Tasso called a few days ago and told me he had a proposition.'

'What is it?'

'Don't know.'

My bag flicked through the rubber flaps and I grabbed it. Outside it was already hot. The sky was blue with a tinge of brown haze, and the north-easterly wind promised to make the place hotter and hazier.

I squinted in the harsh Australian glare, enjoying it. A family I recognised from the plane walked past, heading to the car park, the father pushing a trolley loaded precariously with suitcases, the mother gripping the hands of two children and looking relieved to be home. Was this my home? I hadn't lived in Australia for much of the last decade, and I had changed. Maybe the country had changed, too. Maybe we'd changed in different directions.

'You alright?' said Luke.

'Yeah. Are you?'

'Yeah, I'm good. There's a third thing, but it can wait, I guess.'

'Good news or bad?'

'You can decide.'

A black stretch limo was hogging the pick-up space in front of the taxi queue.

'Where's your car?'

'Didn't drive.'

'So we catch a taxi?'

Luke nodded at the limo. 'No, Tasso sent that.'

The limo driver wasn't wearing a uniform and didn't look like a limo driver.

'This is Bert,' said Luke.

'Steve,' I said.

'Nice to meet you,' said Bert. He had a British accent. We shook hands and he had a firm grip and a steady eye.

'This is ridiculous,' I said to Luke as we climbed in through the offered door. The cabin was about the size of a hotel foyer.

'Don't blame me. Tasso's *your* mate.'

As far as I knew, stretch limos were still not common on the streets of Adelaide, maybe because Adelaide money was mostly old money and stale from a lack of airing. But Tasso had new money.

'Tasso called me yesterday,' said Luke. 'Told me about Hiskey. Suggested I meet you in the limo. I was going to come anyway, of course, but I liked the idea of riding in a limo.' He opened the liquor cabinet. 'My plan is to mix a couple of martinis.'

'Aren't you meant to be at work?'

'It's only the public service. You want one?'

I had just flown halfway round the world and had hardly slept for three days, and it was only nine in the morning.

'Sure, I'll have one. Since when have you been drinking martinis?'

'Since I started riding in stretch limos.'

It was a short trip into the city, so we had to drink fast. We drove through sedate suburbs and the good old parklands that ringed the city like a chastity belt and of which old money was so proud.

'City looks quiet.'

'Yeah, but it's not so quiet. We're in the middle of a gang war. Shots fired, premises torched, brawls, the occasional bashing.'

'And murder.'

'Yeah, and murder, sorry.' He looked at me over his martini glass. 'You okay?'

'Yeah.'

'I was sorry when I heard about . . .'

'Yeah. Thanks.'

'I'm not talking about Hiskey.'

'I know. I don't want to talk about it.'

'That's alright.'

We slipped into the city past the West Terrace Cemetery and pulled over in Victoria Square. Bert opened the kerbside door and Luke drained his drink and we clambered out.

'Bert'll take you to Tasso,' he said. A pretty woman click-clacked past on high heels. Luke made eye contact with her and grinned. She smiled back, with warmth.

'I like being rich,' said Luke.

'I don't suppose you should get used to it, given that you've only got a shit job in the public service.'

'I've missed you, Steve.'

'I've missed you, too.' We hugged again. 'Now piss off before you lose your shit job.'

Tasso had taken up residence in the best hotel in Adelaide. I asked for him at reception and was ushered into what I supposed was a VIP waiting room. After about ten seconds the hotel manager came in, moving so smoothly he could have been on rubber wheels.

'Mr West, my name is Ian Appleyard. I'll take you to Mr Tasso's suite. Leave your bag; I'll have it taken to your room.'

'My room?'

'Yes.' He took a stab at interpreting my expression and my bank balance. 'Don't worry, Mr Tasso has taken care of the charge.' I followed him through a door to a lift that was just for staff and VIPs. 'Mr Tasso said to bring you straight up to his suite when you arrived. He said he would be working in his suite this morning.'

Appleyard looked at me as we rode up. He probably couldn't

work out why a rich man like Tasso would have a poor man like me for a friend. I didn't know either. The lift pinged open at the top to a lobby and double doors. Appleyard pushed the doorbell. For a long time, no one answered.

'He must be working hard,' I said.

'Perhaps Mr Tasso is in the shower.'

I thought that perhaps Mr Tasso was bonking his balls off. I pressed the bell a few times myself and yelled through the door. Then I turned to Appleyard. 'I can take it from here.' He didn't want to leave, but after another attempt to raise Tasso he reboarded the lift and was gone. By and by, the door to the presidential suite opened and Tasso was there. His top half was naked and his lower half was wrapped in a big white towel. It had been a couple of years since I'd seen him, and then only for a day or so, and then fully clothed, but he looked pretty much the same as he always had. There was more grey in his otherwise black hair and more fat than was healthy around his middle, but he was still Tasso. He had never been particularly good-looking, but there had always been an unusual energy in his eyes. It was still there.

'I was in bed.'

'Uh huh.'

'I needed a lie-in. After yesterday. Come in.' He ushered me into a living room dominated by a large window. Two leather sofas were lined up at right angles to the window, with a coffee table between.

'Nice place.' Through doorways I could see a dining room and a study, and there was a third, closed door that probably went to the bedroom.

'Yeah, it's not bad, but there's no fucken balcony,' said Tasso. 'Have a seat. Did you like the limo?'

'It was nice. I thought it needed some pot plants.'

'We only rented it for the morning; usually I just use the beemer. I wanted to give you a treat. Bert's on the payroll. You like him? You want a coffee?'

'Yeah.'

He picked up the phone, dialled a number and ordered three double short blacks with warm cream on the side. Then he grabbed me by the shoulders. 'You're looking well. A bit jaded. We'll cure that. It's good to see you.'

'It's good to see you, too, Tasso. Obscene wealth suits you.'

'It does, it does.'

We sat on the sofas.

'Fern will be out in a minute.'

I lowered my voice. 'Fern? You're kidding.'

'No, why?' He didn't wait for an answer. 'You heard about Hiskey?'

'Yeah. Luke told me.'

'Terrible, terrible. Murdered, can you imagine that? *And* tortured.' He rubbed his face with his hands, hard. 'Wait here; I'm going to take a shower.' He disappeared into the bedroom.

I called after him. '*Tortured?* Luke didn't tell me that.'

Tasso reappeared in the doorway. 'He doesn't know. It wasn't in the paper.'

'How do *you* know?'

'I fucken found him.' He made a big gesture with his arms and vanished again. I heard a door shut within and the shower go on.

I looked around. There was a bookshelf with the sorts of books Tasso would read – one on the American presidents, several on China and a couple on game theory. In front of the books was a lump of rock about the size of a cricket ball. I looked out the window. Immediately below was the Torrens River and the Adelaide Oval, which had grown new grandstands since I'd been here last. Beyond the oval, the northern suburbs stretched out in a pedantic grid.

There was a shimmer of movement and Fern was at the bedroom door.

'Hello, Steve.' She had a languid, smudged-eye look, fresh from bed. She looked good.

'Hello, Fern. Good to see you.' I stood up and we embraced, awkwardly, kissing each other on the cheek.

'Good to see you, too. It's been a while.'

I'd been around when Tasso and Fern had first met maybe fifteen years ago, when she was just eighteen. She had been one more in a long line of young, beautiful, dark-haired and slim girls, but she had lasted longer than the others. Their relationship had been volatile, and Tasso had sometimes entertained us with stories of her tantrums; they had always surprised me because in public she was usually an emotional glacier. But I had thought they'd reached a rocky end a long time ago.

'What have you been up to?' I said.

'Not much. How was America?'

'America was as crazy as it's always been. Probably crazier. Where are you working these days?'

'I work for Tasso. I'm his personal assistant.'

'Oh yeah?' I wondered what didn't count as work in her job.

She perched on the end of one of the sofas.

'He's taking Hiskey's death hard,' she said.

'They go back a long way. It's shocking he's dead.'

'It is.' She stared at nothing for a while. Then she looked up and met my eyes. 'How long since you'd seen him, Steve?'

'Hiskey? Years. I can't even remember.'

'He wasn't in good shape. Did Tasso tell you?'

'He hasn't told me much.'

'Hiskey was Tasso's friend. You know what that means.'

I shrugged. 'Tasso is loyal to his friends, I know that.'

'Yes he is. He was always going to help him. No matter how big a loser he was.' Maybe I looked shocked because she said, 'I'm sorry to say that about a friend of yours, even if you can't remember when you saw him last. Perhaps I should just keep my mouth shut.' She looked at the clock. 'I've got to go.' She ducked back into the bedroom.

I picked up a copy of the *Advertiser* lying folded on the glass-topped coffee table. 'MURDER IN NORTHERN SUBURB!' blared the headline. 'A man found dead in his Buckland Park office yesterday

was murdered, police say,' was the opening line. There was a photo of a small transportable building, which I assumed was Hiskey's office. It was in a drab compound strewn with abandoned piles of metal and old drilling equipment. A cop car was parked next to the transportable and two cops were outside, looking like they were searching for clues. On page five were interviews with a resident and a local business owner, both of whom had heard nothing, seen nothing and knew nothing about Hiskey but were now in fear of their lives. There was an editorial about the apparent rise in violent crime in the city. Usually the victims were members of outlaw gangs, said the editorial, so the murder of a respected geologist was especially shocking. Fern's comment made me hesitate at the word 'respected'. Hiskey had been respected once, sort of, but maybe times had changed. The coffee arrived, brought in by smooth-wheeling Appleyard. He served me one of the espressos.

'Mr Tasso . . .?'

'Will be out soon. Just leave the other coffees there, thanks.'

'As you wish.' Soon he was gone, taking his disappointment with him. I hefted the lump of rock from the bookshelf. It was heavier than it looked and I thought that maybe it was quartzite. I tossed it in the air a couple of times. Tasso appeared, his hair wet. He was dressed in a natty, light-grey suit with a red tie about five inches wide.

'You like the rock? I'll tell you about it later.' He sat down on the couch opposite, added cream and five spoons of sugar to his espresso, gave it a quick stir and took a sip. It wasn't sweet enough so he added another spoonful.

'Appleyard is sorry he missed you. I think he's in love.'

'Yeah, I've been tipping him too much. It's turned him into a kiss-arse.' He tested his coffee again. 'Although probably he's always been one.'

I flicked a finger at the newspaper. 'You said you found Hiskey. That's tough.'

'He'd been beaten to a pulp.' Tasso stared at nothing for a while.

'We were supposed to be meeting that morning in my office, and when he didn't show up I drove out there.'

'I didn't know you and Hiskey were so close.'

'You don't know a lot of things, Steve. You will. In time.' He looked at his watch. 'Speaking of which, I should get going.' He drained his coffee syrup and phoned Bert. 'You must be bugged,' he said to me. 'I suppose Appleyard told you – there's a room booked for you here for a few days until you get settled. Go get a bite to eat, have a massage.'

'Appleyard does a good massage, does he?'

'The best. He'll even kiss your arse. Get some sleep. We'll talk later.'