



HONEY BROWN

Six Degrees

THE POWER OF ATTRACTION CONNECTS US ALL

'A force to be reckoned with'
SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

'Brown's writing is exquisite'
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Six Degrees



The power of attraction connects us all



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by Honey Brown

First published by Jane Curry Publishing 2015. This edition published by
Ventura Press 2015.

PO Box 780, Edgecliff, NSW 2027

AUSTRALIA

www.venturapress.com.au

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National Library of Australia cataloguing-in-publication data:

Author: Brown, Honey

Title: *Six Degrees*

Subtitle: *The power of attraction connects us all*

ISBN 978-1-925183-08-5 (Print Edition)

ISBN 978-1-925183-20-7 (Epdf)

ISBN 978-1-925183-25-2 (Epub)

Fiction, romance, rural-romance, short stories

Design: Deborah Parry

Cover images: Shutterstock

Editorial: Catherine McCredie

Production: Jasmine Standfield



Younger



Sonya must have been mistaken. There had to be some other reason the young man held her gaze the way he did. A steady look, plain, but with a suggestive undercurrent, while the conversation was light. Sonya was smiling, halfway between coming and going, a quick acknowledgment of appreciation –

‘Thank your father, for mowing my nature strip.’

‘Sure thing,’ the young man said, and then the eye contact: adult and direct.

He had thick brown hair, hollow cheeks and a soft mouth. A body that looked as though it had been stretched on a rack: lanky and elongated. His eyes were greeny-grey, and his gaze did not waver; Sonya was caught for a second in the intensity of it. She turned and walked down the path, across the garden, along the uneven pavers of the driveway. Birdsong, slow street traffic, Penny's Jack Russell barking, trees bathed in sunlight, these things were slightly *off*, odd and affected. She rounded the letterbox, refusing to glance back at the young man. He returned inside. She heard him do it. His image dimmed as he retreated into the house. But the intensity stayed with her. No one could do what he had done, do that thing with their energy, their intent, and have it slip easily away. That kind of out-of-the-blue connection stays a while, and is so much worse when it comes from the handsome kid next door.

Sonya got into her car. She sniffed. It was spring. Although the sun shone, the air stayed crisp. Her nose was wet when she wiped it with the back of her hand.

Had she been mistaken?



Yes, she had, she decided, as a way to put things back into perspective and knuckle down to work. The young man (she could not for the life of her remember his name) was nineteen, twenty perhaps. He had P-plates on his

shiny lime-coloured ute. And Sonya, forty-four (she reminded herself, because for a short time there it was as though she had forgotten), had daughters who were eleven and thirteen. When the young man had arrived in Newpark Avenue, four years ago, he'd caught the same bus as Sonya's daughters, albeit to different campuses. He no longer attended school or college. Sonya was about ninety per cent sure of this. Racking her brain, she was able to conjure an image of him in a work uniform of some description. Dark blue? Hunter green? A logo on his shirt. His father's name was Daryl and his mother's name was hard to pronounce – Volanta, Volante, Vol-something-or-other. It was a name Sonya stumbled over no matter how many times she used it. Daryl was the name her brain had retained, clear and sharp. Now, *his* name, the boy's, the young man's, the *teen's*... Sonya reached up and took the pile of doctor's scripts from the dispensary counter, *his* name wasn't something she was going to dwell on any longer. She would stop thinking about those few seconds of strangeness.

It was Tuesday, pension day, the pharmacy filled with elderly customers fresh from the doctor, in a chatty mood. Sonya got down to work. The other pharmacist – Jim – worked alongside her; they were a well-oiled machine. It was a relief to Sonya that Jim wasn't communicative. The store remained busy up until lunchtime. A couple of the pharmacy girls left to take their hour breaks. An order of stock arrived in two large boxes, and Jim

opened the boxes on the dispensary floor and began unpacking them, tidying the shelves as he put the pills and medicines away.

It came to Sonya as she mixed a prescribed ointment for Mrs Deaver, the powdered active agent gritty beneath the spatula, slow to soften and dissolve, and Sonya had a eureka moment, feeling foolishly elated – Patrick! Patrick Lansdale. A pleasant-sounding name, not at all unlikable; perhaps why she had forgotten it. A lot came back to her then – he'd climbed the tree in his backyard once and got stuck. Too old to be tree climbing she'd thought at the time, and she'd believed he must have been drunk or stoned, or both. He'd moved out not long after that and lived somewhere else for a while. He'd returned to the street with his shiny ute, often laughed with mates out on the lawn at a predawn hour, and Sonya had run into him last summer in San Remo, there with his friends, a bronzed, loping gang with sand-encrusted feet and beers in their hands, baggy board shorts and bare chests. Ms Rockwell, he'd said to her, somehow knowing she'd reverted to her maiden name, with a nod behind his sunglasses.

...Patrick. Yes. Sonya wiped the twisted grin from her face and went back to stirring Sorbelene and pressing the dissolving granules against the side of the bowl. She could not believe her own thudding heart.

'Go to lunch, I can finish that for you,' Jim said.

She checked her watch. 'Okay, that would be good.'

It took some effort to flatten the spring in her step, to stop herself glancing at her reflection in the shop windows as she passed them. A dress hanging on a specials rack out the front of a clothes store caught her eye. It was a size twelve, with a soft flowing skirt and mid-length sleeves. What she liked most about it was that it had a row of buttons all the way down the front. She took it into the store and down the back to the change rooms. It was a similar cut to the dress she was wearing, but made of a sheerer fabric, white, sexier, a little see-through. In her underwear, in the privacy of the booth, Sonya turned a slow circle, eyeing herself, tilting her head. Her body had not run rampant with middle age. Handy, too, that the real female form was back in vogue: men admitted to liking a woman's shape, her shapeliness. The softness in Sonya's body didn't stretch to her face – her hair was swept in to conceal the hard edge to her cheekbones, the prominence of her wide brow and the deepness of her smile lines. There had never been anything delicate about Sonya's features, not even as a child. She had a nose that took some growing into, and eyes that had also seemed beyond her years: dark and smoky beneath thin, no-nonsense brows. Although she had, she hoped, grown up enough to at least do some justice to her eyes.

Once upon a time a brunette, now she was edging ever nearer to blond; whether or not this gradual change in colour was enhancing her features, or whether it was detracting from them, she was unsure. Turning blond

was her answer to turning grey.

The new dress, once on, was nice. It went well with the low heels she was wearing. She undid the buttons to show off her cleavage, and her fingers lingered between her breasts. Her breathing deepened (it had been an unnatural mix of quick and shallow and slow and low all morning). Her skin tingled where she touched it. She grazed her fingertips across her neck and ran them, absentmindedly, up and down her collarbone. She thought of him. Wondered. Her eyes, reflected in the mirror, were particularly dark. She sat on the small seat in the corner, lifted the skirt of the dress, and reconfigured him in her mind, felt wrong doing it, but did it all the same. *Too young, too young*, she told herself, while another part of her answered *but, but, but...*

There were women moving out in the store, women her age and older, women she probably knew. They laughed and spoke about a TV program that had been on last night. A hanger was dropped, or it fell, clattering on the polished boards not far from Sonya's cubicle. A bag was zipped open, a purse unclipped. Something was purchased. Small talk exchanged. Sonya touched herself with glazed-over vision and ever hazier hearing. See the damage one look can do. See the good that one look can bring about. Sonya had not felt this alive in ages, she was shocked by how quick she was to be aroused; although it had started that morning, it had been building, everything tainted since his stare, his gently pressed-

together lips, the message as simple as it was simply mind blowing – you turn me on. No mistake.

Sonya felt her brow tighten. It wasn't real, it'd been a tease, fleeting and fun, not serious, but it didn't stop her wanting him now. Youth, and the sexy idea he was unfinished, not yet run-in, the heady knowledge he would not be as experienced as he believed himself to be. He would be nervous; she could almost guarantee it. Sonya closed her eyes and climaxed, stilling her fingers, pressing them to her while she fought to internalise the pleasure and not moan or sigh.

From the other side of the door came, 'Can I get you a different size?'

Sonya froze. 'Oh. Um.' Her voice was broken. She clenched her teeth as the tail end of her orgasm contorted under the conditions, twisting into something less enjoyable. 'I'm fine.'

'How does it look?'

'Yeah, good.'

'Okay, I'll leave you to it.'

'Thanks.'

She breathed, leaned forward and rocked with a half-frustrated ache, plus a lovely throb. She smiled.



'Sonya!'

Guilty feelings made her jerk in fright, coupled with

the suspicion that she'd been outwardly displaying some of what she was feeling inside. She'd been in a trance, staring up at the cafe specials board, the orgasm lingering as a heightened hum in her bloodstream. Sex was on her mind and her body was warm with want. And had she been arching her back, sliding her legs together? It seemed entirely possible that she had been.

'Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you.'

'Hi, no it's...How are you?'

The woman was Elyse, a friend from Sonya's high school days. They had, sort of, stayed in touch over the years.

'Oh you know,' Elyse said, 'same old, same old. You okay? You seem a little...'

Sonya smoothed down her hair. 'I just tried on a dress.' She showed Elyse the bag, opened it so her friend could look inside.

'White. Looks nice.'

'Only thirty-five dollars. Gotta love a bargain.'

'What are you getting?'

Sonya looked up at the specials board. 'Something different today.'

The two women chatted as they waited. They never ran out of things to say to one another. If the conversation ever stalled, they had their shared school years to fall back on. Sonya knew Elyse's children's names and always managed to remember what sport they played. In turn Elyse knew things about Sonya's family –

‘What’s this I hear about your girls going to stay a while in America?’

‘Gone,’ Sonya said. ‘They’re there right now, just for a month. With Campbell.’

‘How is he?’

‘He won a playwright competition.’

‘That is exciting...I didn’t know he wrote plays? He writes for theatre? Plays?’

‘Yes. He’s going to be in residency at Long Island. New York.’ Sonya lifted her eyebrows.

‘Sounds very swish.’

‘Doesn’t it. He brings a bit of glam to the family. Writing is why he moved there in the first place. The girls are spending some time with him before he has to get to work and do whatever playwrights do while they’re in residency. He’s really happy.’

‘Is he with someone?’

‘I don’t think so. I don’t ask him anymore. It only leads to a bizarre situation, gets him hounding me for details on anyone I’m seeing. He’s the worst for wanting to set me up on dates. If any of his single friends are coming to Australia he tells them to “look up my ex-wife”.’ Sonya laughed.

‘Separations always do add a strange twist. My sister is recently divorced, and she says if another person asks her whether or not she’s dating, she’ll respond by screaming in their face.’

‘It never slacks off either. Tell her that.’

‘She’ll be rapt.’

Sonya’s toasted felafel sandwich was placed on the counter, alongside her coffee.

‘We must catch up properly,’ Elyse said. ‘A long lunch when we’ve both got the day off.’

‘Yes, absolutely.’

Sonya manoeuvred her way to the door. Out on the street, a cold breeze had picked up. A few low clouds were creeping into view. Sonya’s thoughts returned to Patrick, or not so much returned to him as followed along the same tangent – she remembered her first high-school party, at a friend’s house, the cool dark of the night compared to the warmth and noise of the lounge room. Outside was where the magic of the party had really happened. The lurching, drinking and singing inside was pale compared to what took place in the shadows of the garden. Sonya’s memory for details was not terrific, but in this instance she could still hear the rasp of the leaves against the rendered wall, she could feel the rough texture of the concrete against her back, the weight of the boy pressed against her. The heavy petting that followed was not as important or anywhere as exciting as that initial body press, his legs against her legs, torsos touching, hands pinning her and also sliding down her sides. By mistake, by instinct, he’d gotten it right, maybe he’d stumbled in the tanbark and never meant to press her that hard against the wall, or with that much urgency, because after that his inexperience had shown. The

touching had become disjointed, the kissing typical of teenage pashing. Sonya had glimpsed something though. If she had been brave enough she would have said to him – stop, go back, do what you did before, lean against me, feel my shape. His firm hands and bodyweight had held so much promise, had seemed so grown up.

Sonya spent the rest of her adolescence on the hunt for that, with each new boyfriend (there hadn't been that many) she had looked into their eyes to see if they might have it in them – the right sort of want, the maturity of *wanting*. Mostly, though, they wanted sex, no more than that. Or they wanted a girlfriend. It was almost as though they did not see the beauty in sex, the beauty of it. At that first party, against the rendered wall, she'd been given a preview of something better. Adult sex. But, thinking now, she wondered if anything had really recaptured that feeling.

Sonya took her lunch to the narrow strip of grass beside the pharmacy. She sat on the bench seat under the plane tree and took on the chilly conditions. She didn't feel like listening to staff gossip, she wanted instead to open up the sex diary in her head and flip through the pages. She had to turn quite a way back. For months, years now, sex had not been high on the agenda. A quiet night in was what she'd most coveted, a weekend to potter in the garden, a get-together with her girlfriends, a tidy house and clean windows, a good day at work – these things rated highly, sex rated lowly.

Becoming single again hadn't sent her into a tailspin of promiscuity, as it sometimes did with fresh divorcees. It had dampened her libido even more. On the surface her marriage breakup had been soothed over with phrases like 'grown apart' and 'the right thing to do' and words like 'amicable', but alone and away from it all Sonya had cried. If he'd cheated, or if they'd fought, that might have been a catalyst, propelling her into a revenge-based sex fest, but when a marriage comes apart as slowly and gently as hers had, there were no turbulent waters from which to haul herself. She'd been drifting.

The busy road behind Sonya provided a perfect backdrop to her contemplative mood. The traffic stopped, started, indicated, entered into roundabouts, went off in different directions. She finished her lunch and stayed seated, too preoccupied with her thoughts to be worried about how she might seem – sitting alone, staring off into the middle distance.

'Well hello there.'

Sonya snapped from her reverie. Sam Mendel was standing at the other end of the bench seat, eyes shining and arms folded. Sam was short and boyish. People rarely noticed his height though, or commented on it. He was well known in town, with a charismatic face that matched his cheeky attitude, and it was these things that drew people's attention. Sonya had an insider's grasp on his height, though. She factored it in because she'd kissed him once, and the height difference had made

her take off her heels. She had, a long time ago, stood barefoot on a young Sam Mendel's shed floor, making out with him between rows of prefabricated shelving. Times had changed: Sam had since cornered the market on shelving, and the sheds where he manufactured it had grown bigger, not to mention that health and safety laws would now rule out barefoot cavorting in an industrial workplace.

'Hello, Sam.'

'I was about to go into your pharmacy.'

'You still can if you like.'

'You never venture down to talk to us commoners anyway.'

'It's my job to stay elusive – drugs shouldn't be easy to get.'

He laughed. 'I see.'

'Don't let your friend Chen hear you calling it "my" pharmacy by the way.'

'He calls it yours too.'

'He does not.'

Sonya had a sparkle – she felt it.

Sam lifted his chin and eyed her. 'What have you been doing with yourself? You look really good.'

'Do I, Sam?'

He dismissed her with a wave, turned away and waggled his finger over his shoulder. 'I know what you're like.'

Sonya folded her arms and watched him leave. Her eyes felt bright and shiny. It wasn't lost on her that

she was mirroring the pose he'd first taken. There was something in that – a body language expert would be able to tell her. Something about mimicking the things we like.

Returning to the dispensary, Sonya looked over the counter and spotted Sam wandering the aisles. She sorted through the unprocessed scripts, looking for his name.

'Have you got Mendel's?' she asked Jim. To cover her interest, she added – 'How long has he been waiting?' As though a local identity should not be made to wait.

'The girls have it now.'

The staff called, 'Mr Mendel, your script is ready.'

He approached. Sonya ducked behind her computer screen, suddenly shy, regretting flirting. What had gotten into her? Things would be awkward between them now. They were awkward already. Here she was hunched stupidly, pretending to be typing when she wasn't, one eye half shut in the glare of the screen. Any moment he would glance up and know she was trying to hide from him.

'I'm off to lunch,' Jim said, and his voice slowed as he saw how she was crouched. 'Who are you hiding from?' he whispered.

Sonya straightened. 'No one.'

And with that she popped up like a jack-in-the-box, seemingly out of nowhere, as though she'd crawled into the dispensary to reach the computer. Sam struggled not

to smile. He cleared his throat. Heat crept up Sonya's face.

'Hi, Sonya,' he called, as though they hadn't spoken outside.

'Hi Sam.'

They fell quiet. They had to. Just with that brief exchange the pharmacy assistant had sensed something between them; she glanced at Sonya. Jim too knew something was up, and looked over his shoulder as he left. Sonya reached for a script. Sam looked down at the jellybeans.

Sam was divorced, but with someone, always with someone – the m.o. of a man like him. Baldness, shortness, dubious dress-sense didn't matter; he transcended it. His partner would be younger, blonder than Sonya, thinner, flasher. The till dinged with his payment. Sonya snuck another look. He was looking at her, his head angled down and his gaze angled up. He posed a question with an arch of his eyebrow – *Do we call one another? Are we game?* Curse Patrick Lansdale! A frustrated teen answering the door (the porn had probably still been running on his computer as he'd stood there) and look at the result. Sonya didn't want to date Sam Mendel, or embark on an affair with him. Faced with reality, Sonya backed up and retreated. She didn't feel so sexy anymore.

The copier beside her burst to life as a prescription label was printed. She busied herself peeling it off and

going for a box of tablets. Sam left without a word and Sonya didn't say goodbye to him either.



Newpark Avenue had a bend in it. Sonya's house was situated past the curve. You had to slow to a snail's pace to turn down Sonya's drive. Her house was brick and tile, two storey. It had an upstairs balcony outside the main bedroom, directly above the front door. It was a balcony she never used because it was small and faced the street. It was ornamental more than anything. There was a bigger balcony out the back, which she used all the time. It overlooked the pool and garden. The window frames and the doors of the house were painted black. The guttering was black. Visitors often commented on this midnight trim.

Sonya drove past her mowed nature strip, averting her gaze as she did, having spent the afternoon calming down, not needing any reminders of that morning. She was at ease with her thoughts of dinner, the washing, the phone bill she'd been putting off paying. As she parked and locked her car, she wondered what her daughters were doing, what time it was in New York. She hoped Campbell was feeding them decent food, she hoped they weren't feeling too homesick, and that they were getting along well with their father. Campbell had never been a hands-on dad, but, nevertheless, the girls suffered in

his absence.

Sonya went through the side gate and into the backyard. The pool needed cleaning. A breeze had blown leaves into the water. Everything else though was as she'd left it that morning, unspoiled by children. Her kitchen was neat and quiet. Her daughters had been gone two weeks, but the tidiness never ceased to amaze Sonya. She enjoyed it so much that she stopped inside the door and drew in a deep and contented breath. A new man in her life would only mess things up.

Sonya had nothing more to do than put down her handbag, slip off her shoes, boil the kettle and put on a small load of washing. In less than ten minutes she was curled up on the sun lounge with a coffee at hand, checking emails on her phone.

Sonya hadn't heard a car pull up the driveway so she was surprised by the knock on her door. Looking through the front curtains – craning to see – she couldn't see any cars parked out on the street. Something told her it was Patrick. It was what a young man would do – wander straight over, unaware of how long it took a woman to wind down from work. The clothes bag was on the floor by the kitchen stool. It felt to Sonya as though she'd been a different person when she'd bought the dress inside it. She got up and went to the front entrance. As she walked along the hallway she could see the tall figure through the frosted glass panels in the door. Sonya smoothed the day-old foundation on her cheeks, ran her hands down

her neck, wiped the shine from her brow.

It was Patrick. Looking sheepish and fidgety on her porch. Perhaps he'd come to apologise for seeming suggestive that morning, although that in itself would be something of a come-on. He gave her a quick and reassessing glance, as though confirming with himself that she was all he believed her to be, before gathering himself together and squaring his shoulders and putting his hands in his back pockets. He faced her, chest open, hips and legs straight, feet planted.

'Hi. Sorry to drag you to the door if you were busy, it's just I...I've got a mate who's into landscaping, and he wants to know where you got that stone edging in your front garden.'

His voice was deep but inexperienced. There were no years of toil or hardship to lend any authority to his low tone. But his delivery was unabashed. Everything about him hinted that he made a point of putting himself out there. He enjoyed crossing boundaries. She'd like to bet he used sayings like – 'full on' and 'hardcore'. An older woman was on his list of *Things I Gotta Try*, the emphasis on the I.

'It was like that when we bought the place.'

'Oh, I thought you'd landscaped.'

'We did out the back – that's probably what you remember. The garden beds out the front were fine. If your mate is desperate to know, I could ring the old owners and ask them.'

'It's okay.'

'It wouldn't be a big deal.'

'No, it's cool.'

He looked up at the light fixture above him, and Sonya thought for a moment he was going to ask her about that. He stayed silent though, brought his gaze down slowly.

What had seemed unbelievable that morning was as unbelievable with him right there in front of her now. There wasn't even a shadow of stubble showing on his cheeks or jaw. His skin gleamed with health. His lips were gentle red. If not for the Adam's apple, the height, the audacity of him, he'd seem underage. Sonya could almost fast forward to the future, after sex with him, and see that the encounter would never settle into anything easily believed or easy to rationalise. That was, perhaps, the point.

'Right...' he said and took a step towards leaving. 'Thanks anyway.'

'Whereabouts do you work?'

Keen to answer, keen to stay, he stopped and said, 'At Beaurepaires. I'm on casual hours while they move to new premises. You know that shed down off Crew Street, near the soccer stadium, the one that's been empty? That's gonna be the new store. In there.'

'Quicker to work for you.'

'I'm moving soon anyway. Don't wanna hang around long, living at home.' He smiled. It was broad and took over his face; there seemed to be no finish line to it,

nothing to pull it up. 'Only had to because the lease ran out on my old place and they hiked up the rent to get us out.'

'You and some friends?'

'One party too many, I think. We burnt a hole in the lawn.'

'Never a good thing.'

'That's why I wanna get a place by myself. Already getting too much dodgy rental history to my name.'

'It's better being on your own anyway.'

'I reckon I'd like it. It's all right being home at the moment because I get the place mostly to myself. Did you know Mum's moved out?'

'Oh.'

'Her and Dad have separated.'

'I didn't know. I'm sorry.'

'It's been on the cards for a while. Dad's taking a bit of a break though, fly fishing up the high country. It's just me alone for the next couple of days.'

Sonya dipped her head and smiled to herself.

'Okay,' she said after a moment. 'I'll see you later, Patrick.'

'I didn't know if you remembered my name.'

Sonya didn't respond. He continued down the steps and out onto her footpath.

'See ya, Sonya,' he called, and added, 'is it okay if I call you Sonya?'

'Of course.'

'When?'

'Hey?'

'When can I call you?' His grin was pure mischief.

'Go away,' she played along.

'Leaving now...' He lengthened his stride down her driveway, touching her letterbox as he rounded it, U-turning into his driveway, looking at her through the gap in the trees.

Not until Sonya was inside with the door firmly shut, and having walked to a shadowed place in the house away from all windows, did she stop and let herself think. It was hard to think. Her head swam.

Upstairs, she sat on the foot of her bed and stared down at the carpet. He was an attractive young man, not looking for love, but looking for adventure. He'd tell his mates, but so what? Her phone rang and her body trilled in time with it. She picked it up.

It was him.

'I thought,' he said, '- while I was on a roll...'

'Patrick.'

'Are you doing anything tonight?'

'Why?'

'Would you like to have a drink with me?'

'How come you've got my number?'

'It's in the book. I've got some wine. I'll bring it over. It's meant to be top notch.' It was hard to tell if he was breathless or if it was the phone line weakening his voice.

'A drink?'

‘Yeah.’

‘Why?’

‘Why not?’

‘Because it’s the worst idea I’ve ever heard.’

‘Nah,’ he said, ‘it’s a good idea.’



This is an extract of *Six Degrees* by Honey Brown.

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