

Emma Styles writes Australian crime fiction about young women taking on the patriarchy. She grew up near the beach in Perth, Western Australia and now lives on the Sussex coast. Emma has an MA in crime fiction from the University of East Anglia. Her debut novel, *No Country for Girls*, won the Little, Brown UEA Crime Fiction Award and the Wilbur Smith Adventure Writing Prize. It was a New Blood selection at Theakston's Crime in Harrogate and was shortlisted for the CWA New Blood Dagger, the Davitt Award for Best Adult Crime Novel and the ACWA Ned Kelly Award for Best Debut Crime Fiction.

BY EMMA STYLES

No Country for Girls
The Shark

THE SHARK

EMMA STYLES



SPHERE

S P H E R E

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For all the lost girls, and the ones who got away

The author acknowledges the Whadjuk Noongar people, the Traditional Owners of the lands, waters and skies where this story is set, and pays her respects to Elders past, present and emerging. She supports the Uluru Statement from the Heart and recognises that sovereignty has never been ceded and this always was, and always will be, Aboriginal land.

Author's Note

During my growing up years, Perth was home to two serial murder cases. Living through those times was formative – it changed our behaviour, the places we went out at night, how we got home after dark. We changed too in response to the shark attacks that happened off our coast every few years. But *The Shark* is a work of fiction and any similarity between the story and real events, or with any person, living or dead, is coincidental. The setting of Cottesloe is real, and locals will recognise much of it, but I've fictionalised some aspects to serve the story. The Broome Street Frangipani House does not exist.

He wakes on his back. Pain and darkness wash through him from the base of his skull, wash away from him and return like waves of black water, like something he should be able to remember. There's a rushing sound and the salt smell of the ocean. Beneath the salt, familiar smells and something more – an otherness.

The rest of him – not his head, still heavy with pain, but his limbs and torso – vibrates with something he can't place until his body is jerked and tipped then rolls back to rest with a new burst of pain and he knows what it is.

Engine hum. The swish of tyres. A vehicle.

There's more pain – his wrists and shoulders. He cannot move his arms. If he could, he'd touch his fingers to the back of his head and the place where he's certain there is injury and blood. Skin and tissue damage he won't think of because they drill fear into him, churning now with nausea. It's not only the movement of the car, and being positioned the way he is, laid out supine across the back seat.

The familiar smells are his. The way he likes his car to smell, and his clothes, his skin and hair. He is meticulous with these things.

It takes this time to understand he is in his own car. He is being driven.

The realisation drills the fear deeper. No one else drives his car. There will be blood on the seat. He needs the car these weekend evenings, for his regular, crucial night drives. But is it a weekend evening? He cannot remember.

His vision is dark and blurred, of the backs of the front seats. There's a new sound now, a frantic whispering hiss. And the smell – the otherness – he recognises it at last as female.

And now he remembers.

He was at home. Outside the house. In the driveway.

Dark. He'd kept the lights off because of the girl. The girl in the golf club car park. The one who'd followed him there.

His heartrate spikes as he remembers. Someone hit him. Someone behind him in the dark outside his house. The girl has an accomplice. There are two of them.

Driving him. Whispering. Scheming in that female way.

What have they done to him?

PART ONE

SUNDAY

1

Raych

Polaris

This is how you taunt a serial killer. How you call him out. You return to his patch, over and over. You don't give it a rest. You are tireless. You wear a flag the colour of blood on your arse, over your heart, and in the depths of your soul, even though you don't believe in a soul any more, not really.

You parade yourself. You are shameless.

You wave, repeatedly, so no one can see you are drowning.

Look, I'm scared of monsters. Monsters with blunt objects and sharp intellects. Monsters with too many teeth. Monsters that come at you so hard and fast you're toast before the first fear hits you. Mate, I'm a gutless wonder. A wimp. A coward. You would

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not think this now, but I'm the girl who holds tight to the safety rail, who swims inside the shark net, who walks with her keys tight in her fist in broad daylight down her own street.

That is to say, I *was* all of those things. Before the worst thing that could happen, happened.

So yeah, there are mitigating circumstances. Here be monsters. All kinds of them. Anyone who thinks otherwise needs their head opened up by one of those saws they use in the mortuary and examined by a pathologist.

Lucky for me I met Carmen Chase when I did.

Or maybe not.

Sunday was the start of it with Carmen, not counting our three days on the psych ward the year before. It was the day before Dad was due to leave for his work shift, and I was awake way early. A night's sleep had come to be a nostalgic thing, a childhood thing. I'd been listening to episodes five through seven of *Inside the Hunt: Serial Murder* but I was too tired to take in the finer points of criminal profiling and dogged police effort.

I lay in bed and tried for a wank but I wasn't in the mood for that either. Fuck, I was practically a pervert. No one in the state I was in should have been able to contemplate an orgasm.

My mind was firing off the usual random, brutal thoughts as I hauled myself out of bed and down the hill to the beach at Cottesloe for my swim, those thoughts that chew me up on a regular basis. But that morning they were more persistent. Like, I knew Dad had forgotten the anniversary six days from today, and I knew the out-of-the-frying-pan house move was just over a month away. I knew there was nothing I could do about anything, but I still hoped I'd get back from the beach

Raych

and he'd apologise and admit to being an insensitive prick and say we weren't moving after all.

I mean, I knew it wasn't likely. But that little kernel of hope, the one bit I had left after the last year? Well, it hadn't been stomped on yet.

The heat and the white noise of cicadas followed me down the hill in a rolling wave, but hung back when I stepped onto the grass terraces above the beach. That early-morning almost-cool under the Norfolk Pines, the smell of salt and reticulated lawn, the smudged glimmer of ocean through the trees. It was the end of a week of absent and erratic sea breezes, unseasonal cloud and humidity that ramped up the February temperatures and kept them there. I knew I'd remember the cool later like it was a dream.

The crow in the pine tree I was standing underneath started telling me how suboptimal life was, but I cut it short. 'Guess what, mate? I already know.' It tilted its head and didn't talk back.

The beach was filling steadily: runners and walkers, hardcore early swimmers like me, families with little kids setting up camp between the flags. No one my age from what I could see. It was busy, considering we were all waiting for him to make his next move.

Neil Fraser Lock. Person of interest. *Suspect*, if you listen to the media, which let's face it we'd all been doing for months.

Yep, a serial killer name, like someone had mapped out his fate from birth. Parents, Robert and Catherine. If you're into true crime like I am, or you know your serial killer history, you'll have a bunch of names like his taking up space in your brain. But why should they? What makes them so special they get to do that?

The Shark

The light on the water was flat. Low cloud that'd burn off later. A sharky light, the surfers call it, because you can't see what's there in the water. I heard the rattle of the shark-spotter helicopter before I saw it, tracking south down the coast towards me. The skin across my shoulders and the backs of my legs flickered and tightened and I thought of the Diana Nyad movie. That incredible swim and all the stuff she had to do to keep safe. Full body jellyfish protection, shark cages and electronic repellents. She'd been Piper's hero – Piper was the better swimmer of the two of us – but now she was mine.

I don't swim inside the shark net nowadays. Those times are long gone.

I hit the water before I could talk myself out of it. Swam my usual fifteen hundred metres freestyle from Cott to North Cott and back with the seagrass scraping my belly and tugging at my fingers because I hadn't gone in deep enough. I was almost at the end of my swim when I saw it – the shark flanking me to my right. I jack-knifed away from it, choked on a faceful of ocean. Then realised it was four big fish in formation and not a shark at all.

FFS, Raych. I caught my breath and waded out of the water. Felt like a jerk until I saw the helicopter, static and hovering, and the shark alarm went off. It was only the second time I'd ever heard it. There was something out there after all.

I stood at the top of the terraces in my red bikini, the water and salt running off me like blood as the beach emptied out. The panicked scramble of bodies as parents hauled kids out of the surf by skinny arms. The red and yellow decked-out lifeguards yelling, 'Vacate the water. Vacate the water, NOW.' And each and every head turned to look at what was behind them in the waves.

Raych

Fake-as-fuck shark or not, I still can't watch *Jaws*. But if there's a shark in the water, looking at it sure as hell won't stop it from coming for you.

The previous time I'd heard the alarm at Cott, the shark was a hammerhead, only 1.3 metres long and already heading west into open water when the spotter identified it. This, to my mind, was not enough to warrant a full-scale evacuation of the busiest beach in the Perth metro area, but people were jumpy. This time, I found out later, it was a four-metre tiger shark a hundred metres offshore. It pays to respect a shark, no matter how it appears.

It's all about the sharks, this summer; both in and out of the water.

The stillness of the morning lingered under the pines but I could feel the street at my back, the cafes and punters and passing cars, the smell of hot bitumen and sunblock, the throb of bass from open-topped cars with wanky personalised plates. I swung to face it with my heart still going hard from the beach evacuation, my guts swooping and wheeling like a hot chip frenzy of gulls.

I knew what his car looked like. Everyone did.

It was a reminder, that shark alarm. All of us on the beach were thinking the same thing.

When would they charge him? Would he take another one before they did?

Had the task force fucked up?

Half the suburb was clamouring for a team from Sydney to be parachuted in to fix it, while the other half were up in arms at the thought.

Some days down at the Cottesloe strip I was certain he was

The Shark

there. In a car, kerb-cruising. Behind glass, victim-selecting. My skin would crawl with his gaze, like flies on dead meat.

And now he had a face, and a name. It was two weeks since Neil Fraser Lock had outed himself to the media. Two weeks since journos had upgraded him from person of interest to *suspect*, and the cops had done nothing to dispute it.

One day he'd be there. One day he'd take the bait, and I'd be ready.

The crow was still there as I left. Disapproving. I swear it was always the same one.

The heat swelled and crackled as I moved out of the shade and schlepped back up the hill from the beach. I'd pulled my combats and top over my already-dry bikini. I took Pearse Street, past the golf club, the way I did every time. I liked to pass the old house, the one we rented when we first arrived in Perth from Sydney, the house that had welcomed us. I didn't get the itch to smash bits of it up like I did most other places.

We lived there from when I was seven to the end of primary school. That was before Dad was seduced by the mining companies, before he amassed his shedloads from the fly-in-fly-out lifestyle and built the cubic monstrosity a few blocks away, where we live now.

The old house was crumbling limestone, rusted lacework verandas and an elaborately sagging tin roof. Now bought up by the same developers that owned the block of units next door, and the blocks either side, all marked for demolition and the new high-rises.

Every second block was a construction site these days. Cott was getting a facelift – or not, depending on how you felt about

Raych

that. Even the tearooms on the beach and the Marine Parade hotels.

As I passed the empty units, the low sunlight flashed gold on the windows of the corner apartment – I'd smashed a fair few ground floor windows at the back of the block on a bad day, but I'd left the ones at the front – and for a second there was a girl behind the glass. She stopped me in my tracks: I fully believed it was Piper. Piper, back from where she'd gone to that night, and watching me. Too shy to come out and say hey, where've you been for the last year and what the holy hell do you reckon you're doing?

But Piper was never shy, and when I blinked and looked again and my heart settled back down, there was nothing behind the window but an empty room.

Ghost-Piper, hiding out in the shadows. My heart playing mean tricks.

No smashing windows today, though. I'd moved on. That's what I told myself. I kept walking, past the hoardings and construction noise, the dust and hard hats of the block on the far side of the units, up the hill to the corner.

It was hard not to stop there and feel the pull of it, only a few blocks south.

The Frangipani House, I called it – Neil Fraser Lock's parents' place. The Broome Street house we'd been seeing on the news and the internet for weeks. He'd moved back in with them while the cops searched his Bicton apartment. I remembered that particular messed-up news story – the two of them on the doorstep welcoming him home while the media camped out on their lawn. As far as I knew he was still there.

The frangipani trees surrounding that house were the biggest

The Shark

I'd ever seen, grown almost to the height of the roof. Shit yeah, I'd been down there. In the dark, mostly. Too many times to count. It was so close to home, to where the girls went missing from, and why hadn't the cops searched it too? It was an oversight, it seemed to me. They'd found nothing at his unit but a big fat zero.

I turned north towards home. I was thinking about the coming night, yet another Sunday, about the pattern of girls disappearing, and what I was going to do.

I can't think about him too hard or I lose my nerve. His MO. What condition the bodies have been in when they've been found each time by an unlucky beachgoer. Only once was it a dog walker, so it's not always the way they show it in the movies.

The Polaris task force has never released details, not one whisper of a leak to the media, but there's always someone with a smartphone on the scene these days. The first time, they thought the girl, Christine Taylor-Watkins, was a genuine shark fatality. That is, until other evidence came to light.

It got clear pretty fast that we had our very own serial killer in the Perth metro area, for the first time since the 1990s, the 1980s, and before that, the 1960s. Once again the killer was targeting the Western Suburbs. You can't get a lot further west than where those girls have been taken from, and where they've washed back up.

The victims have all been swimmers. Accomplished swimmers, too. Swimmers with talent and prospects.

I'm not one of those girls. I swim because Piper did. I swim to be close to her.

I swim to make him want me.

Polaris. Named for the explosive Polaris breach of an

Raych

attacking shark. Depending on how faint-hearted you are, you can Google it.

Here's the thing about last summer.

You inexplicably come out to your straight best mate on the last day of school, and she says it's not an issue, it won't change anything between you. She says, *It's all G, Raych*, which is her thing she says about practically everything. And you stand there with people yelling their summer plans and banging their locker doors either side of you, knowing she's looking at you with those eyes, but you're too scared to look back at her because you don't know what you're going to see in them. Because she sounds so casual about this thing that's volcanoed up out of you (and why now? You can't for the life of you remember why it seemed such a great idea to say it to her) but you so want it to be an issue, you want it to be a humungous fucking issue. You want it to shoot stars and rock planets and change everything between you.

Can't she see that? Hasn't she felt it, for like, the entirety of your friendship since Year Three when you moved to her school?

And then five end-of-high-school summer parties later, at the beginning of February, she kisses you next to the tequila bottle in Ronnie Lam's kitchen, on a street three blocks north of yours and four blocks west of hers and one block back from the beach. She walks her fingers along your collarbone and around the back of your neck like she's been doing it for years, like she's not your straight best mate at all. She takes your hand and leads you away from the crowd and down the long backyard to Ronnie's parents' pool house. One thing leads to another and another, and you ask her if she's sure and she says she is. And afterwards, in that breathless unbelieving space where everything has changed between you

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after all, she smiles this smile she could well have been smiling that day by the lockers if only you'd had the guts to look at her. Because she was always a heap braver than you. And that smile has all of the future in it, not only the rest of the summer but all the summers. All of the two of you and nothing else, and more parties, different ones with different people at them.

And then she looks at the time and she swears and starts pulling straight her clothes. She kisses you again and hands you her old iPod, the gold vintage one she's had since she was a kid and takes everywhere. She asks you to keep a hold of it and says she'll be right back, that she has to do this one thing. *Don't go away, Raych*. Look, you want to go with her, shit yeah, you do. You don't want to let her out of your sight because it's like you've only just found her. But she says it again. *It's all G*. And you do what she says and you wait, because you've always been one for doing as you're told (yes, you're the opposite to her in that way too). You wait, and you're buzzing, with your face hurting from its helpless smile and the party a happy blur all around you like lights in the rain. And you want to know what the 'one thing' is she has to do, but you never find out.

Because she never comes back.

She's the second girl to be taken, except no one understands the significance of the first one yet. She's his type and she's in his stomping ground when she goes missing – the killer they now call *The Shark* – and everyone assumes, once they've put it all together, that it's him who took her.

But no one has found her body yet.

So whatever Dad might have thought, I wasn't moving house. I was going to be taken. I was going to make *him* take me and it would be the last thing I ever did.

Raych

He was going to tell me to my face what he'd done with her.
Forget the profiling, the door to door, the appeals to the
public for thousands of scraps of useless fucking information.
This is how you hunt a serial killer.