

S N E A K P E E K

She is afraid. She should be.

SHEER WATER

LEAH SWANN

'This is an extraordinary novel - I tore through it'

REBECCA STARFORD

'Such striking tender beauty'

HOLLY RINGLAND

SHEERWATER

Leah Swann

FOURTH ESTATE

HarperCollinsPublishers

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Day One

Navigating by polarised light and somehow by the earth's magnetic field, the birds fly home to the summer nesting grounds where they once cracked themselves out of the single white egg laid by each mother. Their migratory tour de force, closing the seasonal loop from the Southern Ocean to the Bering Sea and back, connects far distant places and is perhaps vital to the planet, to all life – making something mysterious visible. Moving as pure, communal form, slipping intact from the lilac haze to dive through sea-spray, their wings shear the waves as they look through the ocean's surface to hunt, and be sustained for the miles ahead. They fly through the night. Not long now. Rest is promised by the first faint beads of light dispersing darkness at sunrise, where the future is continually born.

AVA

1

Ava felt the sea move in her blood before she saw it.

She turned onto the Great Ocean Road and the sea filled the windscreen with all its dark blue eternity. After the hours they had travelled they were nearly there! She'd lost the tailgater some miles back, so she could touch on the brake to slow down. She turned up 'Everything in its Right Place' by Radiohead. 'Everything, everything,' she sang out of tune, and the boys also sang that single word, the only part of the song they knew, their young voices catching her excitement. She watched the sea coming towards her, fresh thoughts tumbling through her mind. Light stains the sky! Water sprays the rocks! Existence is certain! The sight of the riotous sea perversely created a peaceful, crisp and even sweet sensation through her limbs, a coolness like moonlight gathering in the garden before the night gets old. She smiled, she couldn't help it, some buoyant, forgotten self was stretching out and humming *nearly there, nearly there*, when she caught sight of something wrong in the sky.

‘Look at that, Mum!’ cried Max.

Hurling, glittering, its trajectory making no sense; Ava blinked, feeling all that hardness and brightness falling. Was it falling towards them? *A meteor, a diamond – no, not a flying diamond, you idiot.* Should she accelerate or brake? She chose to brake, checking the road and the sky, the road and the sky, over and over.

‘Aeroplane!’ said Teddy.

Yes, that was it. She recognised the distinctive design of a Cessna with the wings on top like a bird’s. She’d flown in them before. ‘Looks like it.’

Later, Ava would think of the phrases *out of the clear blue sky* and *a bolt from the blue*. The four-seater was flying dangerously low and rattling. She closed the windows to muffle the thunderous sound and a thin sweat, the body’s panic tide, broke between her shoulders as Max said with certainty: ‘That plane’s gonna crash.’

‘No it isn’t,’ said Ava, letting the car roll forward a little, and then: ‘Maybe it’s *meant* to land there,’ but the loud wobbling splutter made a mockery of her words. She heard the engine cut out and feared the Cessna would drop from the sky onto the road ahead: she braked again and the three of them watched as the plane nosed into a grassy paddock close to the cliff edge.

‘It *did* crash, Mummy,’ said Teddy.

Ava waited for the plane to burst into flames but it did not. It lay utterly still, smoking slightly. She gripped the steering wheel so tightly her hands seemed glued to it. ‘Oh my God.’

She inched the car forward and looked around. No traffic, now when she needed it most. She knew what she must do and she didn't want to do it. Veering left, she drove a little way into the paddock – she wouldn't leave the car on the side of the road with the boys inside in case a truck approached at monstrous speed. Nor would she park too close to the plane in case there was an explosion. What she wanted more than anything was to simply keep driving. Oh why this, why now?

'Okay, boys,' she said, turning around to look at them while fumbling in her pocket for her phone. Max had the dog on his lap. 'I'm going to run up to the plane and check on the people. Okay? And you must stay here. I might be a little while but you can watch me. Don't go anywhere. Don't get out of the car. *Stay in the car.* Max, you look after Teddy, okay? You have to be a big boy and look after him. Tell him a story, sing him a song.'

'I could tell him golden star.'

'Good boy.'

Ava got out, slammed the door, jammed the keys in her pocket and ran towards the plane, tapping triple zero into her phone, yelling directions to the operator. Her eyes watered in the strong wind. The plane lay crumpled in the field of glary light and wavy grasses with the dark sea beyond. Two heads visible in the cockpit. A black-haired man in a flannel shirt was slumped over the controls.

Ava pulled at the door beside him but it wouldn't open.

'Shit!' She kicked at it. 'Come on, come on.'

She tried the handle again. The door gave and she shouted. Inside, she gauged the state of the occupants: a woman next to the pilot was moaning, her head pressing back into the seat, an unconscious teenage boy and a small, staring girl in the back. All needed help. She'd have to act fast. Ava took a breath deep into her belly to calm herself as she'd been trained to do. She was steadier than this, she was known for being good under pressure – always a much easier feat with a trained team around you.

She grabbed the pilot's shoulders and eased him back against the seat. His face was dripping blood. It seemed his head had been flung forward into the compass. He was breathing. She checked his head for soft skull fractures with her fingertips. None. The blood seemed to be coming from a surface laceration. She checked his arms and legs for breaks. All seemed sound and she couldn't risk leaving him in the plane in any case.

'I'll come back, don't worry,' she told the little girl in the back, whose eyes were fixed on Ava. She unclasped the pilot's seatbelt, hooking her arms under his armpits and pulling until his body flopped onto the ground with a thump.

'Drag him clear!' came a shout, and she glanced up to see a man running towards her. 'You right with him?'

'The passenger side!' she cried. 'A woman! Children in the back!'

'The engine's smoking. Hurry back,' he shouted. His eyes seemed too sharp and bright in the gaunt face covered with

patchy stubble. Was it the tailgater from earlier? Still right behind her?

‘Get him as far away as you can,’ he yelled. ‘*Fuck*. How do you open the door?’

He must have worked it out because Ava saw the passenger door spring open. She glanced over to her car. Saw Max’s head, dimly, through the glass. She dragged the pilot further over the bumpy ground, her arms straining. He was thickset and solid but she had a good angle on him and he was lighter than some of the furniture she’d been moving at home. Remembering the oak desk she’d hauled out of the living room only a week ago, she thought, *You can move him, pull him, pull him as far as you can!* She pulled and grunted and pulled until he was a good way clear.

She stretched out his left arm on the ground at a right angle to his body, with his palm facing upwards. She took his right arm and placed it across his chest so that the back of his hand was on his cheek and held it there. With her free hand, she bent his left knee and gently rolled him towards her. His limbs were limp and heavy. Ava tilted the pilot’s head back and his chin forward to make sure his airway was open, and listened for his breathing. She caught the rhythmic sigh, the lungs opening and closing like doors. She left him in the grass and ran back to the plane.

As she got closer she saw why the man hadn’t got the woman out of the front seat. The steering column had pierced her just below the sternum.

‘We need special equipment to get you out of this,’ the man was telling her.

No, no, that poor woman wasn’t alive, was she? And it was obvious to Ava, it would be obvious to anyone, that no *equipment* would save her.

‘You can trust me,’ the man went on. ‘I can see exactly what’s happened. Take this. It’s morphine.’

He bit the lid off a small bottle of fluid that was in his shirt pocket and poured it into the woman’s mouth. Through Ava’s mind flashed: *Who keeps morphine in their shirt pocket?*

‘There are kids in the back,’ Ava heard herself say. ‘I’ll get them ...’

‘I’ll pass them to you,’ the man said, climbing into the back.

The woman made a choked liquid groan like someone about to vomit. Her eyes were swimming with pain. Ava felt a dark and nauseous horror roll over her, and she clamped her lips together and grabbed the woman’s hands and found them cold and damp. What comfort could she give her? The poor thing was as grey as a fish. She was dying and she knew it and Ava knew it. She didn’t know what to say.

She cried out: ‘She’s going, she’s going!’

The man reached over from the back seat and put a hand on the dying woman’s shoulder. ‘You’ll be alright,’ he said.

He withdrew his hand and Ava heard a seatbelt unclick. The woman would not be alright. Ava looked into her and said, from nowhere, not even knowing what she meant: ‘Don’t be frightened. You’re going into love.’

The woman's eyes seemed to go black, the fire, the pain, the silvery light, the emotion vanishing until they were as flat as stones on a riverbed when glimpsed through a rushing river. Ava felt weakness, shock, shiver through her. She laid two fingers on the woman's wrist.

'She's gone,' she called. It was getting smokier. Where was the smoke coming from? Was the engine alight? She smelled fumes filling the cabin. Fumes meant fuel was leaking.

Shit, shit, not good.

'Take the girl!' the man said.

Ava heard sirens. Two points of light reflected from the man's eyes were visible from where she half knelt, half stood in the hazy cockpit. Her own eyes stung. She sensed the vacuum of the dead woman all around her as though it was sucking life out of the plane and to steady herself she locked on to those points of light. The man seemed to know what he was doing. She took the child in her arms.

'Got her?'

'Yep.'

The girl was yellow-faced under her tan but conscious; she dug her fingernails into Ava's shoulders. She didn't seem to be injured. Ava took her onto her hip and whispered calming words as she ran across the grass to where she'd dragged the pilot. She heard a second set of sirens. They'd be here soon. In minutes. She placed the girl down on the grass, her hands gentle yet firm, and told her everything would be okay and hoped like hell that the dead woman wasn't the girl's mother.

The crazy wind blowing off the sea twisted hard through the grasses, whipping the little girl's plaits against her cheeks and making the shrubs flap, a mean wind with no pity under its harsh wings.

On the ground beside them the pilot was trembling and his eyelids were twitching, coated with blood from his head wound. Ava wasn't sure he could hear her but she spoke to him anyway. 'You've been in an accident, but you're alright, and you'll be at the hospital soon ...'

Ava kept her voice quiet and soothing, as much for the little girl's sake as for the pilot's. With the edge of her jumper she wiped off the drops of blood congealing over his eyes. He moaned and the girl shrieked.

'Shh, shh, it's okay, it's okay,' Ava told her. 'He's just making a sound; it's nothing to worry about.'

The pilot's eyes were opening. Dark irises surrounded by yellowish whites mapped with veins. He was trying to speak.

'You're okay. Help is coming.'

He grabbed at her hand with a suddenness that startled her. When he spoke – she wished he wouldn't try – his words were garbled. *Muttburrs. Shoonev gon.*

'No, well, it's alright now,' said Ava, and heard her voice resonate through the atmosphere disrupted by death and confusion. 'Help is coming.'

She smelled something burning. Had the plane's engine caught fire? Would there be an explosion? Were the boys safe? She was about to head back to them when she saw the other

rescuer running towards her with the teenage boy over his shoulder, his teeth gritted, his forehead covered with soot.

He flung the boy to the ground and croaked, coughing: 'Know CPR?'

'Yep.'

'You blow.'

He positioned the boy's head before placing his hands on the boy's chest. Ava knelt and exhaled into the boy's mouth.

'One, two, three—'

Ava blew again. She heard the popping in the boy's chest, faintly, then building, till the chest heaved and the boy sighed.

'Okay, he's breathing! Thank Christ.'

Ava caught sight of a firefighter directing a fire truck around a fallen gum and across the lumpy paddock. She jumped up and felt for her car keys in her jeans pocket as she scanned the field, so full of smoke now that it was getting hard to see. Which way would the wind push the fire?

'My boys ...' she said, breaking into a run.

She sped back past the burning plane, passing police and firefighters, her feet pounding the dirt, sending vibrations up through her legs, up to her skull, as she hurtled towards her car. She'd jump in, start the ignition, and get the hell out of there!

She'd tell her sons what good boys they'd been. Teddy, Max. They'd be frightened! She had to get to them, comfort them, protect them. Her heart thudded, her chest hurt; smoke scratched her throat, her eyes. As she ran, she saw an ambulance

pull up and the white van so filled her with relief she wanted to scream or shout or cheer. It wasn't her responsibility now! The experts had arrived!

More people were gathering, cars were pulling up, a handful of bikies and a truck driver, quite a crowd. She just wanted to get out, get herself and the boys moving as fast as she could.

Ava ran. The plane's engine exploded behind her and she cried out. The ground shook beneath her feet. Dust flew up. Her ears rang. She got to her car and fell forward over the bonnet, looking through the windscreen, expecting to see her sons' terrified faces looking back at her. She saw nothing.

She shouted their names. 'Max! Teddy!'

Were they hiding? Yes, that must be it, they must have taken off their seatbelts and hidden behind the front seats! Ava ran around to open the door and found the back empty. They weren't there. The only thing looking up at her from behind the seats was the dog.

Emotional, powerful, unforgettable. From a stunning new literary talent, you won't be able to put down this novel about a mother's love for her children - it will break your heart.

Ava and her two young sons, Max and Teddy, are driving to their new home in Sheerwater, hopeful of making a fresh start in a new town, although Ava can't help but keep looking over her shoulder. They're almost at their destination when they witness a shocking accident - a light plane crashing in the field next to the road. Ava stops to help, but when she gets back to the car, she realises that somehow, among the smoke, fire and confusion, her sons have gone missing ...

From a substantial new Australian writing talent, *Sheerwater* is tense, emotional, unforgettable. Perfect for readers of Mark Brandi's *Wimmera* and Stephanie Bishop's *The Other Side of the World*, this is a beautifully written, propulsive, gut-wrenching and unputdownable novel - an aching, powerful story of the heroic acts we are capable of in the name of love.

'With visceral prose and a tense narrative arc that unfolds over just three days, speeding towards a dramatic conclusion *Sheerwater* is a propulsive read with an acute emotional core ... likely to hold appeal for readers of both literary and crime fiction, and fans of writers such as Emily Maguire, Emma Viskic and Sofie Laguna.'

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