

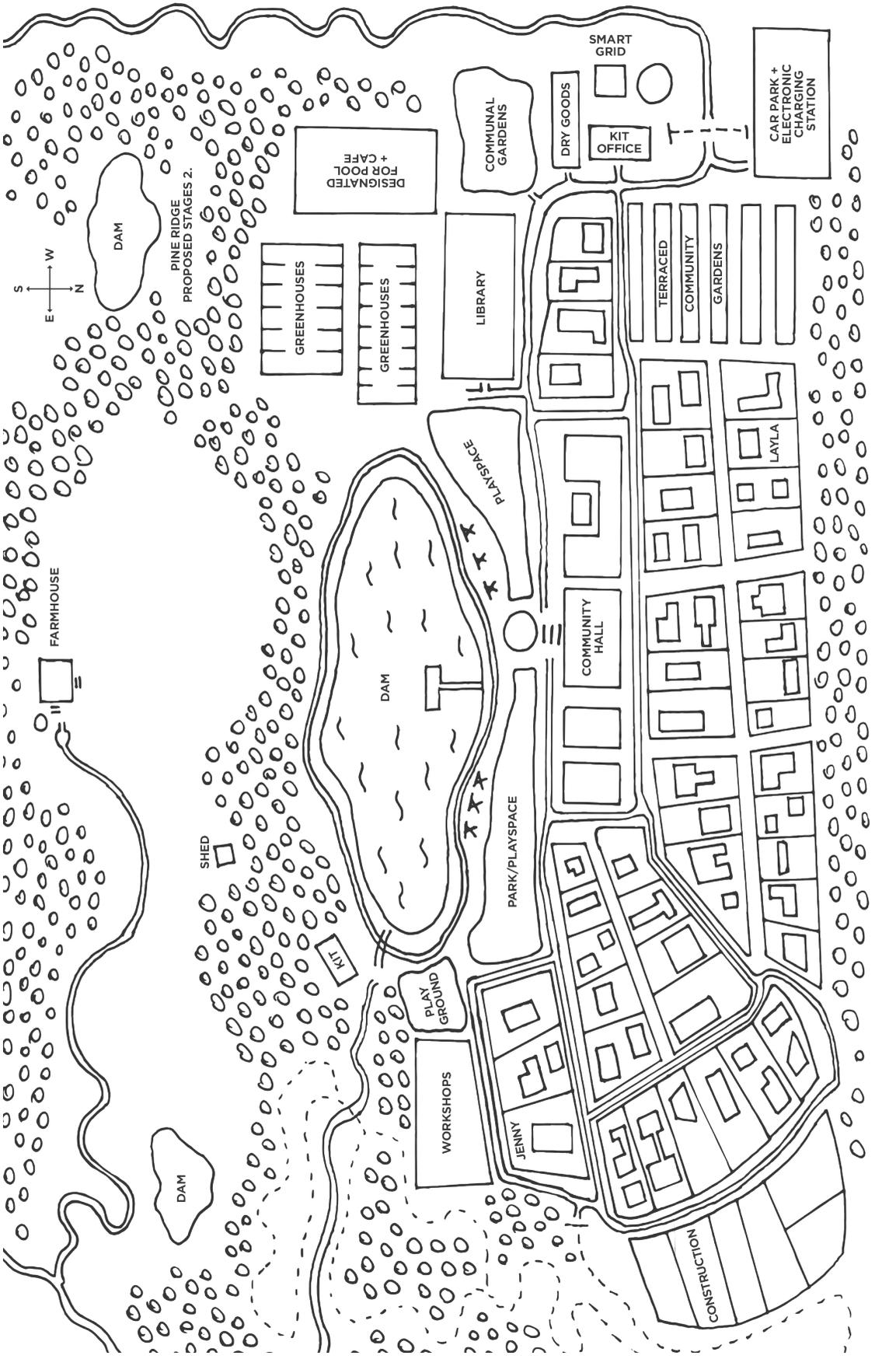
**'Vivid, tense
and troubling.'
CANDICE FOX**

THE SHADOW HOUSE

TWO MOTHERS.
TWO SONS.
ONE WORST NIGHTMARE.

ANNA
DOWNES

**AUTHOR OF THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER
*THE SAFE PLACE***



DAM

PINE RIDGE
PROPOSED STAGES 2.

DESIGNATED
FOR POOL
+ CAFE

GREENHOUSES

GREENHOUSES

LIBRARY

COMMUNAL
GARDENS

DRY GOODS

KIT OFFICE

SMART
GRID

CAR PARK +
ELECTRONIC
CHARGING
STATION

TERRACED

COMMUNITY

GARDENS

LAYLA

COMMUNITY
HALL

PARK/
PLAYSPACE

PARK/
PLAYSPACE

DAM

SHED

KIT

PLAY
GROUND

WORKSHOPS

JENNY

DAM

CONSTRUCTION

FARMHOUSE

PROLOGUE

The bones come first. A gift, but nothing wanted. Next, a doll: a likeness, a promise. And the blood marks the choice. It finds a face, and then you know.

Help. I need help. That's what he said; I remember it clearly.

Voices in the night, and footsteps, soft and slow on a carpet of green, on the grassy path that goes up to the blue sky and the diamond moon and the place where the birds fly north. That's where it happened.

A noise ... No, two noises, one after the other. First quiet, then loud. Oh, there was so much blood. I didn't know what to do; I didn't know how to help.

I remember all of it – only then I forget.

The rules, though; I won't forget those. Listen to me carefully, repeat after me: bones, doll, blood. That's how it goes. Things arrive, and then ... a magic trick. Here one minute, gone the next. No one knows where he went. No one except the birds. They know. They saw everything.

It wasn't his fault. It couldn't be stopped.

Things arrive, and then they take you.

ALEX

1

‘Okay, kids.’ I brought the car to a stop and peered out the windscreen. ‘I think this is it. We’re here.’

Neither child replied. Glancing at each of their sleeping faces in turn – Ollie beside me in the front, Kara in the back – I felt a pang of anticlimax. The first time I’d seen Pine Ridge it had taken my breath away, and I’d been looking forward to seeing their expressions as we drove in. Well, Ollie’s expression anyway. At eight months old, Kara couldn’t yet tell animal from vegetable so I wasn’t likely to get a reaction from her, but I’d been certain my fourteen-year-old son would be impressed. Instead, he was snoring. Headphones on, head lolling awkwardly to one side, drool glistening in the corner of his mouth.

‘Kids,’ I said again, a little louder. As if in response, Ollie’s phone lit up in his lap, buzzing softly with a notification. I glared at it, tempted to pick it up and hurl it straight into the nearest bin.

Instead, I checked the house number and street name again. Definitely the right address, and the description matched. A split-level at the far end of the village, the last in a row of four. White walls, blue roof, two balconies and a timber staircase at the side. No one was waiting to greet us, though – which seemed strange until I remembered that I hadn’t given an arrival

time when I'd emailed a few days earlier. I'd had no idea when or even if we'd be able to get away, so I'd told them I'd have to play it by ear. *No problem!* had been the cheerful reply. *Just pop into the office when you get here, and we'll show you around.* But the office had been empty when I'd passed, so I'd carried on driving along the narrow main road to our allocated unit, following the directions I'd been given. There was no rush; eventually either someone would find us or we would find them.

I took a breath. The car was cramped and had that family-road-trip smell: feet and Happy Meals. Our belongings were packed around us so tightly I'd half-expected the windows to burst. Storage cartons, loose shoes and books, jumbo flexi tubs bought in a hurry from Kmart and stuffed with our dirty laundry: I'd crammed them Tetris-style into every inch of available space. An expert job, if I did say so myself. But if there was anything I did well, it was packing up and moving on.

I rolled my window down and a fresh breeze pushed its way into the car, mussing my hair like a drunk uncle and bringing with it the sweet, earthy scent of resin. A tingle of excitement skipped across my skin: *I live here now.*

I looked over at Ollie again, ducking my head a little to see under the peak of his cap. It was one of those gorgeous Australian November days – not too hot or sticky, just perfectly pleasant – but my son was bundled up in his usual sloppy green hoodie. It needed a wash; the orange circle on the front bore a tomato sauce stain the size of a fifty-cent piece.

'What's wrong with you?' he said, suddenly opening one eye. 'Why do you keep staring at me?'

‘Oh. Sorry. You’re awake.’

‘What?’ My son held one of his headphones away from his ear and tinny music escaped from the padded speakers: a thrum of bass overlaid by a single screeching note like an air raid siren.

‘I said, you’re awake.’

‘Um, obviously.’ He pushed his cap back and tugged his headphones down around his neck. ‘Why are we stopped?’

‘Because we’re here. We’ve arrived.’

Ollie shrugged and picked up his phone. Checking the notifications, he moved his thumbs rapidly over the screen. *Tap-scroll-tap-tap-scroll.*

‘Don’t you want to get out and take a look around?’

With his eyes still glued to the screen, Ollie opened the car door and got out. Quickly checking on Kara – still asleep – I did the same. I could smell orange jasmine, lilly pilly, lemon myrtle and just a touch of sea salt. No car fumes, no bitumen, no overflowing wheelie bins. I inhaled and my lungs felt fresh and clean.

Ollie turned in a slow circle, surveying his new surroundings. Although it was just two hours from the guts of Sydney and only fifty kilometres north-east of the Central Coast’s suburban sprawl, Pine Ridge ecovillage could not have felt more remote. Nestled high up in the hills and built on former farmland, it seemed completely cut off from the chaos of the city. No skull-shatteringly loud roadworks, reckless P-platers screeching their tyres or the constant ECG *blip-blip-blip* of pedestrian crossings. From the middle of the two-hundred-acre site, all you could hear were birds, bees and the hush of the wind.

The sense of peace was exaggerated by the shape of the valley – shallow and round, like a dish – and the flat stretch of water that lay at the bottom like an enormous blue puddle. The surrounding trees acted as natural soundproofing, muffling what little noise there was until the quiet felt almost artificial. The beauty of the village, too, seemed unreal. The Lego-spill of buildings from the top of the ridge to the valley floor reminded me of those European towns featured on jigsaw puzzles and postcards – Positano, Cinque Terre, Santorini – and their proximity to the dam made me think of the tranquil lakeside settlements I’d visited while backpacking in my late teens: Bled, Hallstatt, Seyðisfjörður, San Marcos La Laguna.

Ollie, however, was unmoved.

I jangled my keys while I waited for his verdict. My adrenaline levels were still high from the quick exit, the fast drive. Both hands on the wheel, one eye on the rear-view mirror. Dry mouth, cracked lips, nailbeds bloody and stinging after weeks of nervous chewing.

I watched my son’s face, desperately wanting – *needing* – him to like it as much as I did. Driving down from the ridge just moments ago, I’d been so confident. How could you *not* love the seclusion, the sense of absolute safety? The road that wound away from the freeway and down into a lush tangle of eucalypts, the turquoise sparkle of the dam, and the way the land held the houses like a pair of cupped hands. It was perfect. But now, seeing the isolation through my son’s eyes, the colours of Pine Ridge took on a darker hue.

In some areas, the village was still under construction. The roads were powdery, marked with dirty tyre tracks and clumps of earth. Mud-spattered concrete mixers sat next to freshly poured slabs and elaborate timber frames, and dotted around the periphery was evidence of the old farm the village had been built over: abandoned trailers, coils of rusty wire, stacks of discarded piping. Rickety old sheds slouched in corners like sulky children.

But, judging by the pace at which the development had grown since I'd first seen it, that would all get cleared up soon enough. Thrown away or burned. Paved over, smoothed back, polished up and transformed into something better. Out with the old, in with the new. I liked that sentiment. Clearly, there was no room for the past in a place like Pine Ridge. Or that was my hope anyway.

'I cannot believe,' Ollie said eventually, in the disdainful tone of voice he reserved especially for me, 'that you're making me move to a hippie commune.'

'It's not a commune. It's an ecovillage.'

'Whatever.' He went back to his phone. 'It's a dump.'

I sighed, deflated. 'Why don't we go on up and take a look around?'

We climbed the six wide steps that led up to the house. On either side, terraced retaining walls had been topped with grevillea, bottlebrush and other low-maintenance shrubs, giving the garden a slightly wild and unkempt feel.

'Why couldn't you just have grounded me or something?' said Ollie behind me. 'That's what all the other parents have

done. No one else is getting pulled out of school and shipped off to the middle of nowhere.'

At the top of the steps, I studied the windows, looking for signs of life. 'This isn't your punishment, Oliver. Try to think of it as an experiment. The lease is only three months. If after that we decide we don't like it, we can leave.'

'Like we always do.'

'Not always.'

'Yes, always.'

'And you *are* grounded.'

'What?'

'Until further notice. *That's* your punishment.'

His jaw fell open.

'Sorry, mate,' I said. 'Your actions, your consequences.'

'But I didn't even *do* anything!' He stared at me, outraged. 'I already told you—'

'I know what you told me, and I don't want to hear it again, not right now. We can talk about it later.'

He scowled for a moment longer before returning to his phone, face blank, jaw set, neck bent forward at an alarming right angle.

I tried the front door, but it was locked. I knocked, but there was no answer. I took a step back, studying the first-floor windows. The house, like many of its neighbours, was built on a steeply raked block, and from what I could see, the two levels had separate access. The upper connected to the road behind while the lower – a smaller, self-contained version of the more spacious upstairs – opened onto the road in front.

‘Why only three months?’ Ollie’s sharp question came out of nowhere.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Just seems random, that’s all. Like, isn’t it usually six months? Or twelve?’

‘This place works a little differently,’ I said. ‘They only want permanent residents, because they’re trying to grow the community, so you get three months to decide if you want to invest – like, try before you buy. And if you don’t want to commit by then, you have to move on.’

‘So, what happens if we want to stay?’

‘Well, we could build.’ I walked around the side of the house to where a paved patio had been set into the lawn. The wooden staircase I’d glimpsed from the road led up to a small balcony on the first floor. ‘They have a scheme here called “collaborative living”, where you put your name on a list, they match you with people you might like to live with, and then you all buy a block of land together.’

‘Huh,’ said Ollie.

‘You split the cost of the land but build your own separate houses, which makes it half the normal market price.’ I looked back at the lower level windows. The whole place seemed deserted. ‘I don’t think anyone’s here. Should I go upstairs, do you think? Or head back to the office?’

Ollie ignored my questions. ‘I don’t get it. You want us to buy a house with strangers?’

‘Not a house, a block of land. The individual house, once we built it, would be ours. You could help design it. Doesn’t

that sound exciting?’

‘No, it sounds mental.’

I wandered back around to the front of the house.

Ollie followed me. ‘Why would we buy anything with people we’ve never met?’

‘Well, obviously we’d meet them first. That’s the point of the temporary lease; it’s like a trial run. Gives us time to get to know people, see if we like them.’

And see if they like us, I added silently.

‘What if no one wants to live with us?’ said Ollie, as if reading my mind.

I shrugged. ‘Then we leave.’

‘Right.’ He pulled his cap down over his eyes. ‘Of course we do.’

‘Oh, come on,’ I said. ‘Don’t be grumpy. Look at the view!’ I spread my arms wide, gesturing to the forest on our left, the houses to the right, and the undeveloped land on the other side of the valley. Rainwater tanks sat in terraced gardens and solar panels reflected the sun. Butterflies and bees orbited nasturtiums and geraniums, and directly in front of us, just visible over the top of the neighbouring houses, the dam reached out to a rising hill and bright green grass stippled with shade. In an empty paddock, a single old farm building stood prettily like a scene from a painting: white weatherboard, a gabled roof and a wraparound veranda.

‘Isn’t it beautiful?’ I breathed.

‘It’s shit,’ came Ollie’s blunt reply. ‘Where are the people? Where are the shops, the cafes, the surf clubs? Where is the *surf*?’

I pointed out a volleyball net strung up between two poles, and an adventure playground under bright orange shade sails. Barbecue stations, picnic tables and a swimming jetty that stretched out over the glittering surface of the dam. The freshly paved roads, I said, were perfect for bike and scooter riding. 'It's like a holiday park, don't you think?'

With a mere toss of his head, my son made it clear that he did not. 'Can I have the car keys?' he muttered. 'I need to charge my phone.'

His dismissal hurt. I dug in my pocket and passed him the keys. As I watched him trudge back down to the road, I spotted something on the top step. A brown cardboard mailing box sitting in the shade of an overgrown shrub, half-hidden by flowers and leaves. I crouched down to take a closer look: was it meant for me?

The package was unmarked – no name, no address – and unsealed. Curious, I pulled back one of the flaps, revealing feathers and a tiny scaled claw. A single beady eye. And glistening pink lumps.

'Oh, god.' I jumped away from the box. Was that ... a *dead bird*? I went back to check. 'Ugh, gross.' Definitely a bird. Definitely dead, squashed and mangled, like it had been gutted by a cat or a fox. Some of its feathers had been torn out and tiny bones were sticking out of a gash in its flesh. The inside of the box was smeared with a dark, oily-looking substance.

What the hell was a dead bird doing on the doorstep? Surely the rental properties were checked and cleaned before new tenants moved in?

Then I heard a noise. A swishing, crackling sound coming from somewhere nearby. It sounded like footsteps moving through long grass. I got to my feet. Turning in a slow circle, I gazed up at the house, my eyes travelling the walls to the upper level, the windows and the overhanging eaves. I looked at the neighbouring houses and into the forest, but as far as I could see, no one else was around.

I glanced down at my car to where Ollie was sitting in the front passenger seat with the door open, his headphones back over his ears. He already hated the place; smashed animal corpses wouldn't improve his opinion. I picked up the box and walked around the side of the house. Finding a bin at the back, I lifted the lid, threw the box inside and immediately felt better.

But as I returned to the front of the house, I was gripped by a wave of panic so intense that I had to lean against the wall to stop my head from spinning. Was I doing the right thing, moving to Pine Ridge? The cumulative weight of my decisions threatened to crush me: all the things I could have done but hadn't, all the things I'd done but shouldn't have. Every choice suddenly seemed like the wrong one.

My heart raced, my stomach churned. *All your fault. Shitty mother.*

Closing my eyes, I tried to calm my thoughts but heard Stuart's voice instead. *Go on, run. Go ahead and try. I'll find you.*

I sucked in a breath and let it out slowly. *Get. It. Together. Your children need you.*

Right on cue, I heard my daughter stir, her soft kitten noises floating through the open car window. My breasts tingled as

my milk came down in response – nearly time for another feed – and as Kara’s cries increased in volume, my own words to Ollie echoed in my head: *Your actions, your consequences*. Briefly I considered opening my mouth and wailing along with her.

But, no, everything would be fine. Better than that, it would be great. I had already done the hard part and now I would make us a new life. We would be okay.

I opened my eyes and thought about the glorious distance between me and Sydney, the gigantic spread of national park with its creeks and cliffs, rainforest and swollen rivers. I looked at the hills, the trees, the water, and all those shiny new homes. Above them all was the sky, big and bright and full of potential.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

It will be fine.

There was nothing better than a fresh start.