

MICHELLE
PRAK

BARREN
CAPE



SIMON &
SCHUSTER

New York · Amsterdam/Antwerp · London · Toronto · Sydney · New Delhi

BARREN CAPE

First published in Australia in 2025 by
Simon & Schuster (Australia) Pty Limited
Level 4, 32 York St, Sydney NSW 2000

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

New York Amsterdam/Antwerp London Toronto Sydney New Delhi
Visit our website at www.simonandschuster.com.au

© Michelle Prak 2025

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior permission of the publisher.



A catalogue record for this
book is available from the
National Library of Australia

ISBN: 9781761428432

Cover design by Luke Causby/Blue Cork

Cover images by Sam Farallon and Peter Porter. Cover images modified with the assistance of AI tools.

Map by Josie O'Malley

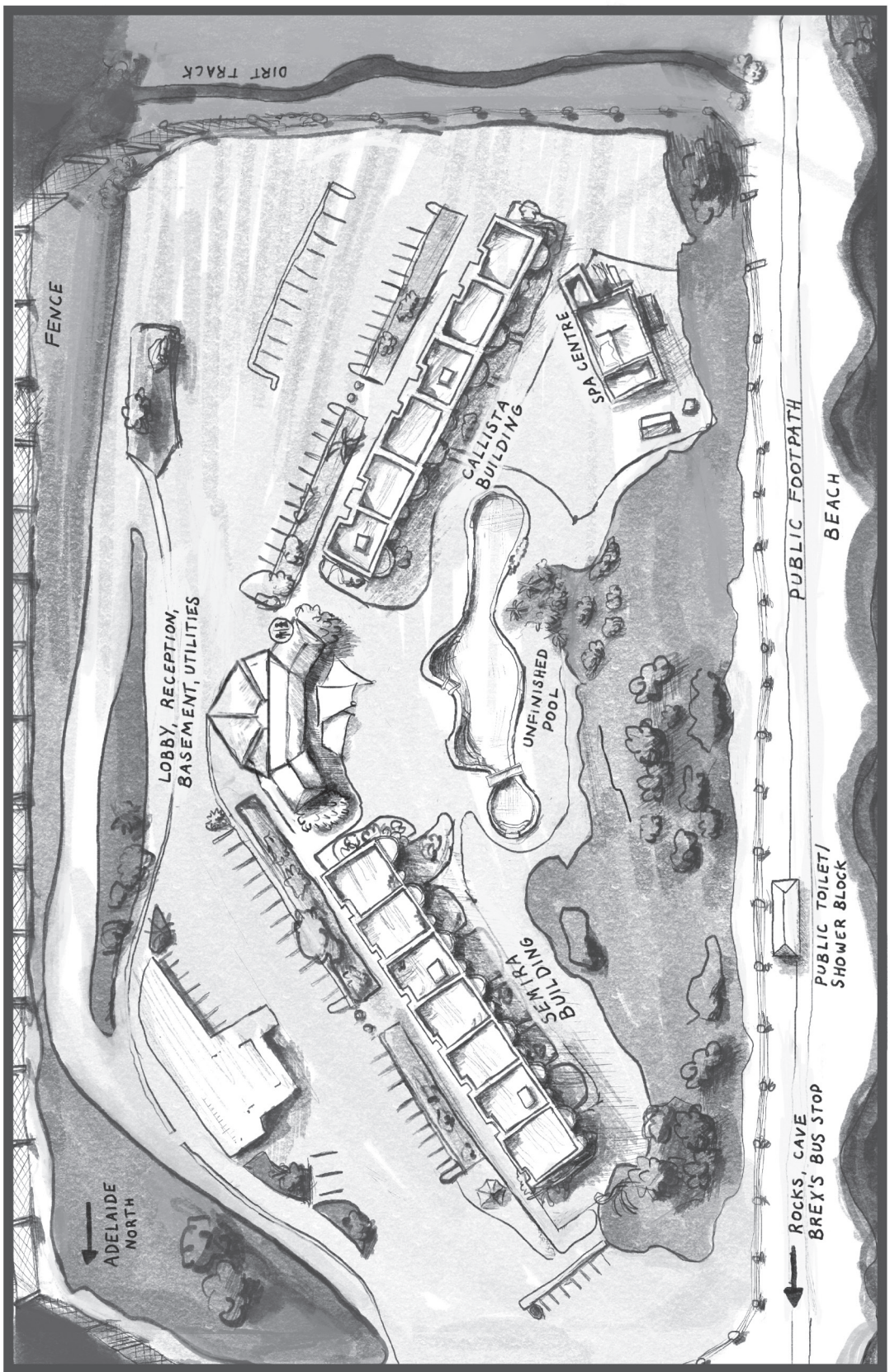
Typeset by Midland Typesetters, Australia

Printed and bound in Australia by Griffin Press



The paper this book is printed on is certified against the Forest Stewardship Council® Standards. Griffin Press holds chain of custody certification SCS-COC-001185. FSC® promotes environmentally responsible, socially beneficial and economically viable management of the world's forests.

To Sam and Able
I promise there will always be a home



DIRT TRACK

FENCE

LOBBY, RECEPTION,
BASEMENT, UTILITIES

CALLISTA
BUILDING

SPA CENTRE

UNFINISHED
POOL

SEMIRA
BUILDING

ADELAIDE
NORTH

ROCKS, CAVE
BREX'S BUS STOP

PUBLIC FOOTPATH

BEACH

PUBLIC TOILET/
SHOWER BLOCK

MAC
FEBRUARY 2025

When the sun sank, the resort became a museum of dark shadow, and although the night remained warm, the wind gathered strength, scattering leaves and rushing through crevices. Far away, the security gates rattled and other random clinking rang over the empty construction site. My nerves were only slightly calmed by the pounding of the nearby waves, a reassuring white noise.

It was the perfect season for bare-cube living: a raging summer, impossible to be outdoors for more than two minutes without building up a sheen of sweat. The naked floor and walls of my new domain were cooling, and the ocean breeze streamed through the balcony. I paced the area out; it was about five by five metres. The ceiling was high, difficult to know how high, way taller than house ceilings. You might think concrete would be one bland colour, yet it was a variety of patterns and raking, similar to the flat patches of nearby sand. A natural work of art.

With such a blank canvas, I was initially stumped on how to set up. I had bought a cheap inflatable mattress at the hardware

store and dropped it smack-bang in the centre of the space, the exact opposite of every other room I'd inhabited. I threw my sleeping bag on top. There was nothing ordinary about this, so why should the furniture arrangement be ordinary?

The lack of plumbing was a problem. There was a secondary room, earmarked for an en suite, with drainage holes and a pipe trailing one wall, but no toilet installed. There was a public toilet by the beach, but using that would mean wriggling under the fence again and taking the dim footpath parallel to shore. It was a long way and another opportunity for me to be spotted – though I still hadn't seen anyone else. Before I went to sleep, I crept into the corridor, feeling intensely defenceless, as if predatory neighbours would emerge. I'd checked every room on this fourth floor, but I hadn't scoured the entire site. Anyone could be lurking. My pulse sped as I descended the stairs, the light of my phone only amplifying the horror-movie vibes. The isolation and loneliness of the resort had attracted me here – now I was coming to terms with the implications. I was on my own and couldn't yell for help if anything went wrong. Sleeping here wasn't only illegal, it was risky.

Outside, I crouched by a thicket. I reminded myself it was perfectly natural to urinate in the great outdoors, although I couldn't bring myself to squat too close to the ground, terrified of creepy crawlies creeping you-know-where. After I was done, I ran upstairs. For a few heart-pounding seconds, I couldn't find my room. When I did, I closed the door and sat against it.

I wondered: was I a genius or a fool? If I was discovered, if this was reported to the police and became public, my friends, family and workmates would find out. It'd be devastating.

I imagined my humiliation; the confusion on people's faces.

What happened to Mac? Did you hear?

Some might find this setup daunting. Nerve-wracking, foolish. Breaking and entering, and sleeping alone on the outskirts of the city. Yet for me, it was worth the risk. Worth it for the independence, the privacy and the quiet.

There was no landlord, no neighbours, no hosts, no creeps. Nobody I was forced to make small talk with. I was in charge.

There were also no locks on the doors. Instead, I jammed a rubber stopper under mine to help secure it. Did it mean my room was impenetrable? No, but what place truly was?

1

ERIKA NOVEMBER 2024

Our landlord said she was selling, and gave Mac and me sixty days' notice. Not having our lease renewed was a shock and disappointment, but I tried to see the situation positively.

'We'll probably find an even better place – with neighbours who don't complain about our music so much,' I said.

That optimism turned out to be foolish. We were stunned by rental prices; when did they climb so high? We arrived at open inspections to find a herd of other applicants already queued. The streets were choked with cars, we squeezed past others through doorways.

'Was it this busy when you first went flat-hunting?' I asked.

'Nope,' Mac said. 'This is nuts.'

We stuck to two-bedroom flats within our price range. We'd hoped to remain near the city centre but were forced to the outer suburbs. A lot of the affordable flats were on noisy main roads, decades old, and in drab, multi-storey blocks. Mouldy tiles, dented doors, stained and rippled carpet.

‘Let’s go for it,’ Mac said during one inspection.

I pulled a face. ‘You reckon?’ The flat was opposite three fast-food stores and the whole neighbourhood smelled like deep fryer.

‘The clock is ticking.’

‘Okay, babe, you fill out the form.’

Our application was declined. I was both insulted and relieved.

Next, we inspected a maisonette in the northern suburbs, sitting in a rabbit warren of treeless streets. Torn wire screens clung to the windows and topless toddlers watched us from the yard opposite. ‘We could get another person for the third bedroom,’ Mac said.

‘It’s a dump!’ I said.

‘We’ll ask for a short lease, and meanwhile we’ll keep searching for something better.’

‘Okay, fine, whatever . . .’

We were unsuccessful again. The letting agent said the home went to an applicant who signed a two-year lease. Two years in that hellhole!

As moving day approached, we made reluctant temporary arrangements. I returned to my parents’ house, not the only kid at home. Of my three older brothers, two were still in residence and showing no desire to move out. It’s why my parents didn’t oppose my return: what difference would another body make?

But I was deflated, feeling like a failure, schlepping my belongings up the driveway and back into my childhood home. Being there would put a dent in my dating life too, just when I was on the brink of asking Theo out. He was a DJ at Horizon,

the city nightclub where I worked the bar part time, and an absolute gorgeous god.

Shortly after we said goodbye to the flat, I saw it listed on holiday letting sites. It'd been repainted and a new stove and flooring installed. Shining pot plants lined the balcony – where had they come from?

I sent the link to Mac and called her. 'That bitch,' I said. 'She lied to us.'

Mac groaned. 'Unbelievable.'

'She's asking for two hundred dollars a night!'

'No wonder she didn't want to renew . . .'

'Look at how she's spruced it up. When we lived there, it took *months* to fix the leaking tap. Hey, we should stay there for a couple of days under fake names and leave a zero-star review.'

'She's not getting another cent out of me.'

After we hung up, I stared at the images a while longer. Mac and I had shared the tiny flat for almost a year, one of the best periods of my life. I was nineteen, studying, and keen to leave home. Mac was twenty-three, had dropped out of uni, was working two jobs and desperately seeking someone to share the bills after her first flatmate left. We cooked for each other, watched shows together, shared chores without any major arguments. Our lives gelled.

At least I had fallback accommodation and a willing family. Mum even baked a 'Welcome Home' red velvet cake. I felt bad for Mac, because her homecoming would be very different.

2

MAC

Sandy blocked the doorway when I turned up. ‘The spare room isn’t ready.’

My mother knew I was coming, she’d had a week’s warning.

‘That’s fine, we can get it ready now,’ I said brightly.

‘You seem to think it’s going to take five minutes.’

‘Don’t move mountains for me, I just need the bed . . .’

She huffed and moved aside. Bags draped over my shoulders, I lumbered past. I didn’t have a lot of belongings, especially as our flat had come fully furnished. I’d already stashed kitchenware and electrical things in Erika’s parents’ shed, and planned to keep my clothes here, at Sandy’s two-bedroom unit.

I’d called my mother by her first name since early high school. I can’t remember the exact day it began or why, although I suspect it was after one of our regular shouting matches. My older sister Georgia still called her ‘Mum’.

This wasn’t the house I’d grown up in; that was several suburbs away. Sandy downsized after Georgia and I left home,

and had the end unit in a row of four. She'd moved further west, where thick powerlines dominated the skyline and the hooting of the Osborne train could be heard regularly. I glanced at the two framed photos on the wall. They both showed Georgia in cap and gown at her graduation ceremony, the first in our family to finish university. Months earlier, I'd given Sandy a photo of me winning two bodybuilding medals. I hadn't seen it since.

Sandy led the way, arms swinging, shoulders stiff. Neither of us wanted this, but thanks to my fruitless flat-hunting, I had little choice. She paused at the entry to the spare room. 'Don't touch anything.'

The blinds were down, the air warm as a sauna. I hadn't stepped into the room in ages. My old double bed, pushed beneath the window, took up much of the space, the mattress invisible under piles of clothing. Two wardrobes shared a corner, so stuffed with packages that they were impossible to close. A card table in the centre of the room was covered in Australia Post packaging, and cardboard boxes full of enamel earrings, chunky necklaces and gold bangles that weren't real gold were stacked on the carpet. Sandy made a living selling crap – sorry, *bargain merchandise* – on Facebook and eBay. When we were growing up, Sandy was a salesperson in department stores. She hated it, used to complain about being bossed by 'clueless brats twenty years younger than me'. As soon as she became an empty-nester, Sandy quit, purchased a laptop and became a Marketplace Professional. I assumed it'd be short term and wouldn't possibly pay a living wage, so I was surprised when she earned enough for holiday bus trips with her girlfriends. She was doing all right.

‘I don’t know where to start,’ Sandy sighed, waiting for me to relent and say I’d go elsewhere.

Instead, I lowered my bags to the floor. ‘Where can we move those clothes? Is there space in one of the wardrobes?’

‘No! Don’t mess with them, I’ve got them all sorted.’

‘Where, then? C’mon, I have to use the bed.’

She ventured further in, not looking at me. ‘This wouldn’t happen if you had a boyfriend.’

‘Seriously?’

‘You could live with him.’

‘What makes you think he’d be any better off than me? I don’t need a boyfriend, I can take care of myself.’

‘Doesn’t seem like it.’

I drew a deep breath. ‘I won’t mess with the room, I promise. I’ll barely touch a thing.’

That night, I slept on the edge of the bed with the clothes stacked like cotton corpses beside me. Sandy banged cupboard doors and clinked teaspoons until past midnight. I pulled headphones on and lay on my back, fighting the urge to scream. Georgia was lucky to be far away in London. We’d talked about me visiting one day.

Maybe that day would come sooner than expected.

I reached for my phone and visited a flight comparison website, skimming the UK deals. Flights weren’t as expensive as I assumed they’d be, and I could nab a seat tomorrow if I was ready. Tomorrow! I was stunned, electrified at how easy it would be to leave this life behind. All you needed was no home, no career, no relationship bolting you down.

I FaceTimed Georgia, taking a gamble that she might be

available. The dial tone sang for a while before she appeared on screen.

‘Hey you!’ she beamed, still in uniform, hair escaping from her bun. She was a nurse; a Hammersmith hospital had eagerly snapped her up when she arrived.

‘Do you have a sec to talk?’

‘Yeah, I’m at home. What’s up? Everything okay with Mum?’

I snorted. ‘She’s fine. I’m actually coming to you live from the spare room.’

‘Jeez. Don’t touch any of her merch.’

We laughed.

‘I shouldn’t tease, it’s awesome that Mum’s able to earn a quid,’ Georgia said.

‘Ha, you sound like a real Londoner.’

‘I *am* a real Londoner.’ She mock-pouted and I giggled.

‘Speaking of London . . . I’m thinking of visiting.’

‘Really? About time! When?’

‘I’m not sure, I thought I’d float the idea past you first.’

‘How long would you stay?’

‘I’m not sure about that either, but if I’m ever going to travel, now’s my chance. I could backpack through a few countries, then maybe stay and get a job . . .’

‘I’ve been telling you to do that for ages.’

‘I know, I know.’ I rolled my eyes. ‘I have to apply for a passport and a working visa. How long did it take for your visa to get approved?’

‘Less than a month, but I was classified as a skilled worker. It might be different for you – no offence.’

I pinched my bottom lip between my fingers. ‘Do you think I’ll be able to get work over there?’

‘With your experience in hospitality? Sure, not a problem.’

‘Awesome, that’s good to hear.’

‘What does Mum think?’

‘I haven’t told her but she won’t care, she’ll be happy to see the back of me.’

‘Don’t be like that, Mac. She loves you.’

‘If you say so . . .’

‘I s’pose you’ll wanna stay with me at first?’

I smiled sweetly. ‘I’d love to, if that’s all right.’

‘Of course.’

‘Oh, wait. What about gyms? I’ll need to find one asap, I can’t lapse—’

‘Mac. There’s more than eight million people in London. We have gyms.’

‘Of course, I’m just so excited. Wish me luck with the visa and passport paperwork nightmare.’

‘Good luck!’

After we ended the call, I leapt off the mattress and danced between Sandy’s overflowing cartons. *Yes, yes, yes!* Georgia supported me. My impulsive, huge, audacious idea was looking more solid by the minute.

When I’d calmed, I began typing a list on my phone. There was a lot to organise if I wanted to leave the country.



Sandy was at her laptop when I entered the kitchen the next morning dressed in my gym gear.

‘Morning,’ I said. ‘Did you sleep all right?’

She shook her head. ‘No, I don’t sleep well when other people are in the house.’

I bit back a reply. She was insufferable. Other people? I was her daughter.

She scraped her chair back and went to the sink. There was a planter box on the other side of the window, and I copped a view of her dying parsley and coriander. ‘Are you having a proper breakfast or still starving yourself?’

‘That was last year when I was preparing for the comp,’ I said, ‘and you know it’s called shredding.’ I dropped two slices of bread into the toaster, poured a big glass of milk and stared at Sandy as I gulped it down.

‘I guess I’ll have to think of something to cook for dinner then.’ She folded her arms and shrank into herself like she was standing at a funeral.

‘I’ll cook tonight,’ I offered.

‘No, it’s my kitchen, I know my way around. Anyway, I don’t have your ingredients.’

‘You don’t even know what I’m making!’

‘Mackenzie, please don’t shout so early in the morning.’

I stretched past her and dumped the glass in the sink. ‘I spoke to Georgia last night. We’re making plans. I’m going to visit her, stay in England for a while, find work over there.’

Sandy gaped. ‘When did this all come about?’

‘I just told you – last night.’

‘It’s very rushed, what’s the emergency?’

‘Well, I’ve got nothing holding me here. When you think about it, it’s the ideal time for me to travel.’

‘What about your jobs, what are your bosses going to say?’

‘They can replace me, easy.’

‘Where will you live?’

‘With Georgia, at first. Then I’ll get my own place. Jeez, what’s with the hundred and one questions?’

Sandy slapped her palms on the laminate benchtop. ‘You’re going to mess things up for Georgia!’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Don’t rely on Georgia to rescue you. She’s doing so well over there, why do you have to ruin everything?’

The toast popped, but the rest of the room was still and quiet. We glared at each other. Her T-shirt had slipped, revealing a beige bra strap.

‘Is that what you think? I ruin everything?’ I said.

She plucked her T-shirt into place. ‘You should stay here, Mackenzie, get a real job. Don’t go running off. You already wasted a year studying and racking up uni debt. You need a good income, then you’ll get another flat.’

‘I’ve got a good income!’ I said. ‘The problem isn’t the amount of rent, especially when Erika and I band together. I’ve told you a hundred times, there aren’t enough vacancies. Don’t you follow the news? I’m not the only person that’s affected – there’s a national housing shortage.’

‘You have to get in first, Mackenzie, be quick off the mark. Ring the agent directly, ask them to tell you when a vacancy is listed.’

‘I’ve done all that!’ I waved my arms.

‘Well, you can’t run off to London, it’s not fair on Georgia. Leave her out of this.’

‘Georgia wants to see me, she wants to help me. Unlike you. Why are you never on my side? When it comes to me, you’re such a fucking bitch—’

Her chin jutted. ‘Don’t swear at me.’

‘You make it fucking impossible not to.’

‘I don’t have to put up with your behaviour, this is my bloody house.’

‘Oh, well, aren’t *you* the lucky one? It’s no wonder you live alone, nobody can stand you!’

I raced into the spare room, flinging the door so hard that it bounced back at me. I kicked it in frustration, threw my backpack onto the bed and shoved in clothes.

Whump!

My toiletries bag landed near my feet.

‘Watch it!’ I said.

‘Don’t forget your toothbrush,’ Sandy hissed.

When I was packed, I hurried down the narrow corridor, not caring when my bags scuffed the walls. ‘Thanks for all your support,’ I called out.

‘You’re welcome!’

I reached the tiny porch and Sandy didn’t waste a moment in latching the door behind me.