

PRAISE FOR *THE SAFE PLACE*

‘I loved *The Safe Place* . . . it was tense and atmospheric with the seemingly idyllic yet eerie setting. A truly gripping read’

Karen Hamilton, *Sunday Times* bestselling author of
The Perfect Girlfriend

‘*The Safe Place* is compellingly disturbing. Anna Downes is a powerful story writer who will lull you into a false sense of security – and then pounce. An author to be watched’

Jane Corry, *Sunday Times* bestselling author of *I Made a Mistake*

‘A dark and wonderful debut that lulls you in with beautiful prose and complex, believable characters, then beats you over the head with a killer plot and a thrilling climax. It’s the kind of book you race through as quickly as you can so you can start it again.

Everyone will be talking about this book’

Christian White, bestselling author of *The Wife and the Widow*

‘The tension ratchets up and up in this beautifully paced thriller – an outstanding debut, populated by complex and sympathetic characters. You’ll be thinking about them long after you’ve finished reading. Destined to be a book club favourite’

Chris Hammer, bestselling author of *Silver*

‘*The Safe Place* is such a rare thing – a claustrophobic, addictive thriller that lets you actually feel for all of the characters involved. Anna Downes has such skill in combining the heart-in-mouth feeling that everything is building to a disaster with genuine emotion’

Gytha Lodge, *Sunday Times* bestselling author of
Watching from the Dark

‘A brilliantly atmospheric novel that keeps you equally gripped and unsettled from page one. Starkly original and with an alarmingly plausible premise, this is destined to be a bestseller’

J. P. Pomare, bestselling author of *In the Clearing*

‘Creepy and addictive, *The Safe Place* is a slick modern thriller with the perfect amount of old-fashioned twists’

Sarah Bailey, bestselling author of *The Dark Lake*

‘I was totally enchanted by the world Downes created, that swooning place . . . But what I loved most of all was her prose. It is so rich, alive, affecting’

Lee Kofman, author of *Imperfect*

‘As thrilling and gripping as everyone is saying. Put this on your #mustread list now’

Kate Mildenhall, author of *The Mother Fault*

‘Richly evocative with a dark, atmospheric heart, *The Safe Place* is seductive, irresistible and suspenseful. I was completely gripped from the first page to the pulse-pounding end. I recommend reading *The Safe Place* poolside with a strawberry margarita in hand. It’s the perfect summer suspense’

Christina McDonald, bestselling author of *Behind Every Lie*

THE
SAFE
PLACE

Anna Downes was born in Sheffield, UK, but now lives just north of Sydney, Australia. She worked as an actress before turning to writing and appeared in television dramas such as *Eastenders*, *Casualty*, *Holby City*, and *Dalziel and Pascoe*. Her writing has been shortlisted for the Sydney Writers Room Short Story Prize and longlisted for the Margaret River Short Story Competition.

The Safe Place was inspired by Anna's experiences working as a housekeeper on a remote French estate.

ANNA DOWNES

THE

SAFE

PLACE



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For my family

PROLOGUE

When the car bypassed the main terminal building and pulled up next to a sign that said *Private Jet Centre*, Emily breathed in so fast she almost choked.

‘You’re kidding me,’ she said to her driver (her very own *driver!*), who smiled and opened the door for her like she was Cinderella.

A security gate led her to a glass tunnel to a departure lounge so elegant it could have been a hotel lobby. Precisely no one rummaged through her luggage or even asked to see a boarding pass; instead, she was ushered straight out onto the tarmac, where two pilots and a flight attendant greeted her personally with shiny white smiles. The attendant took her passport and led her towards a small plane, sleek and bullet-nosed, with just six passenger windows and a little staircase that dropped from a door in the side.

Emily climbed the stairs into a glossy, leather-lined heaven. Suddenly regretting her choice of comfy flight-wear (black leggings, a Ramones T-shirt and a pair of old Converse sneakers), she stood gawping at the armchairs and full-length sofa, waiting for the crew to realise their mistake and escort her back to the terminal. *We’re so sorry*, they would surely say. *We thought you were someone else*. Or she would wake up in her shabby little flat, her lungs full of mould spores, to find that it had all been a dream. *Any minute now*, she thought.

But she was not asked to leave, and the plane did not shimmer and fade. It took off into the sky with no questions asked, and a measly one hour and forty minutes later they were back on the tarmac. This time, though, instead of London's neat network of buildings, Emily was looking at a low, barn-like structure with an unpronounceable name painted in large blue letters across the side.

She made her way off the plane and into the tiny terminal, where her suitcase and passport were waiting for her. The arrivals lounge was small and silent, and totally empty. The only other person in the room was a tall man with a tangle of dusty hair and a jaw full of stubble. Emily put her bag down on the floor and squinted at him. The man stared back with heavy-lidded eyes. From somewhere on the tarmac outside, there came a muffled shout and the slow, intermittent beeping of a vehicle in reverse. She hesitated, waiting for someone else to appear – perhaps a nice silver-haired gentleman with a peaked cap and a handwritten sign. But eventually she had to concede that this towering, glowering stranger was her ride. She gave him a tentative smile.

'Emily?' he said in a low, gruff voice. In a thick French accent, her name sounded more like *Ey-milly*.

She nodded.

'Yves,' he said. Then he reached out, grabbed her bag and strode off towards the exit, leaving her to trot after him like a puppy.

In the car park, Yves opened the door of an enormous black SUV, so tall that Emily had to climb up into it like she was mounting a horse. He stowed her bags in the boot, planted himself in the driver's seat and reversed out of the parking space without so much as a cough.

As they sped away on a flat stretch of road, Emily attempted conversation from the back seat. 'It's nice to finally meet you,' she said. 'Will we be working together much?' But Yves didn't reply, and seventeen minutes later he still hadn't said a word, so she resigned herself to gazing out of the window in silence.

Road signs flashed by: *Avenue de Cordouan, Boulevard de Pontailac, Rue des Platanes*. She tried them out, rolling the sounds around in her mouth. *L'Île d'Aunis. Saint-Marc-des-Fontaines. Beaulieu-les-Marais*. They tasted like poetry.

Green fields were punctuated by yellow sunflowers and rust-red roofs. White stone walls ran over hills striped with neat rows of grapevines. She saw farmhouses, rivers and tall spindly trees; pointed spires, crumbling churches and, in the far distance, a thin blue stripe of ocean.

Gradually, the roads became narrower and the trees became thicker. Then, with no warning at all, Yves swung the car onto a dirt track. Leaves brushed the sides of the car like fingers, and branches reached out to one another overhead, forming a tunnel of green. The bonnet dipped low as the track sloped downhill, giving the impression that they were burrowing deep into the earth.

They drove through increasingly dense woodland for what felt like hours. Twigs tapped at the windows and snapped under the tyres, and Emily tried to remember if the Frenchman had produced any actual evidence that he was who he said he was. Kicking herself, she realised that she hadn't thought to verify his identity; she'd just followed him to his car and strapped herself in.

Her breath became shallow. She watched the man who called himself Yves. His eyes were locked on the road, his jaw clenched tight as he navigated the potholes. Furtively, she checked her phone: no service.

It became dark inside the car as the canopy grew thicker and daylight gave up trying to break through. Emily wondered how much further they would, or *could*, drive; surely they would hit the ocean at some point? She twisted in her seat to search for signs of civilisation, but the view through the back window was even less reassuring than the one in front. The land looked as if it had never seen a fence, let alone roads or buildings. They were in the middle of nowhere.

Finally, just as she began to weigh up the pros and cons of throwing herself from a moving vehicle, they began to slow. Peering through the windscreen, Emily spotted rods of black iron up ahead. A gate. As they came closer, she could make out letters in the design.

‘Querencia,’ she read aloud.

They pulled up next to a gleaming security panel and Yves opened his window, reaching through to punch buttons on a small keypad. *‘Voilà,’* he said, startling Emily so much that she jumped. *‘We have arrived.’*

There was a buzz and a clank, and as the gates slowly parted, Emily’s mouth fell open, all thoughts of escape melting away. A wonderland of colour and sweet floral smells seemed to spill through the gap like paint: purple petals, emerald leaves, pink blossoms, orange butterflies, all pouring out of a pure blue sky. Even the light seemed different from any she’d seen before.

The SUV lumbered onto a sandy driveway. Rolling down her own window, Emily stuck her head out, eager to absorb as much as possible. Cicadas chirruped steadily from their hiding places, and somewhere to her right she could hear chickens clucking as well as a thin plaintive cry – a sheep, maybe? Pathways snaked off between sprays of lavender, and a hammock swung lazily next to

a cluster of tomato plants, each one bursting with bright-red fruit. Ahead, through branches and foliage, she glimpsed the sparkle of a pool, and beyond that yet more water, darker and flecked with white.

And then two houses rose out of the flora, one on either side of a sprawling circular lawn: two huge whitewashed castles standing sentinel over a fairy kingdom.

Emily gave a low whistle as the car came to a stop. She could feel it already. This was the kind of place where things could be different, where *she* could be different.

‘What *is* this place?’ she breathed.

‘You like it,’ said Yves, more a statement than a question. His face was turned away, his expression hidden.

‘*Like* it?’ She was lost for words. She felt like Dorothy stepping out of her monochrome world into the technicolour Land of Oz – so much so that she half expected Munchkins to crawl out from between the flowers and start singing. She shook her head, marvelling at the speed with which her life had changed. Rock bottom one minute, and the next minute ... this.

Tipping her face to the sun, Emily let the breeze trail across her face like a silk scarf.

‘I love it,’ she said, as the gates closed behind her. ‘I never want to leave.’

EMILY

Goosebumps spread over Emily's arms like a rash.

'Sorry,' said a tall blonde woman, who had neglected to introduce herself. 'We'll be ready to go in just a tick.' She fiddled with her digital camera, adjusting its position on the tripod.

Emily smiled politely. She had auditioned in countless church halls, but this one took cold and draughty to new levels. Echoes bounced off the walls and danced around the room, making it almost impossible to hear what anyone was saying.

A bearded man sitting behind a wooden table stifled a yawn.

'I do apologise,' the woman muttered, squinting at the camera. 'This won't take a moment ... Aha! There we go, all sorted. I hope this doesn't make you feel too uncomfortable, Emily, but we're recording all our auditions today. It helps us when we're having our casting discussions later on. Just ignore it if you can.'

Emily nodded. Under her skirt, sweat trickled down her thighs.

'Right, so we'll start recording. Just give your name and agent to camera, then we'll get straight into the scene.'

Emily closed her eyes and took a breath, letting it out slowly.
Just breathe.

The bearded man picked something out of his teeth. She'd recognised him as soon as she walked in, but he seemed smaller in real life, and less handsome. One spindly leg lay draped across

the other, the angles of the knee joint sticking out through his trousers, and his arms were folded across his chest in an attitude of utter indifference.

‘Take your time. Whenever you’re ready,’ the blonde woman said, sneaking a glance at her watch.

Emily swallowed. *Breathe. Come on. You can do this.*

She gave a small nod. *Ready.*

‘Okay,’ said the woman, ‘Off you go.’

‘Excuse me. Ex-cuse me, can I get past?’

Emily elbowed her way through the slow pedestrian traffic. Pushing past a couple taking selfies, she tripped over the wheels of a pram and smacked her wrist against a lamppost. She kicked the post and swore loudly, twice. The owner of the pram flinched and steered her baby away.

Emily pressed her sleeve to her eyes. Despite weeks of preparation, the audition had been a complete balls-up. All the lines she’d thought were safely committed to memory had somehow evaporated, leaving only a screaming inner monologue of fear and self-doubt: *I can’t do this I don’t know the lines I can’t do this they hate me I can’t feel my legs I can’t do this.* She’d coughed, stammered and sweated her way through the whole thing and only just escaped without vomiting. Why did that keep happening? What was wrong with her?

Also, she’d been an absolute idiot to think that Carnaby Street would be a shortcut; she should have known that the lunchtime crowds would be out in full force. *Stupid, stupid, stupid, can’t get anything right.* She checked the time on her phone and sped up, squeezing past street performers and buskers until finally she

broke free of the crush and scurried down the last few streets to the office.

Gasping for breath, she pushed through the revolving door and into the lobby. A signal light went on above the nearest lift and she ran for it, arriving just in time to collide with a tall man emerging from between the silver doors.

‘Sorry,’ she mumbled, her face full of starched lapel.

‘No harm done,’ said the man.

He held the lift open for her and she rushed inside, looking up at the last minute to realise she’d just crashed into the company’s managing director. ‘Shit,’ she said as he turned and walked away, then clapped her hand over her mouth. ‘I mean, good afternoon, Mr Denny!’ Cringing, she jammed her finger repeatedly against the button for the fifth floor until the doors slid shut.

Checking her appearance in the mirrored walls, she realised she looked insane – her hair stuck out in clumps, her top lip glistened with sweat and her eyes were ringed with smudged mascara. But, she supposed, running all the way from Soho to Mayfair would do that.

When the doors *pinged* open again, Emily scuttled across gleaming tiles with her head bent low and dived behind the reception desk. Glancing around, she rattled pens and flapped paper in a pantomime of important activity. *Just arrived? No, not me, I’ve been here for hours.* Fortunately, no one seemed to be paying any notice. She pulled out the collar of her shirt and blew downwards, trying to dry the excess moisture underneath.

‘Sweaty, flushed, out of breath. Somebody get laid on their lunch break, did they?’

She whirled around to see a lacquered head poking out, spy-like, from behind a newspaper. *Urgh. David.* The HR manager

of Proem Partners sat on a low sofa with his legs crossed, his eyebrows raised in a matronly expression of disapproval. *Busted.*

Emily decided to brazen it out. 'Well, why not?' she said, smiling. 'It is hump day.'

David simpered. 'You're late,' he said, tapping his watch. 'Again.'

'I'm know, I'm sorry. I lost track of time.'

'Audition, was it?'

'Um. Yes. Sorry I didn't tell anyone; it was kind of a last-minute thing.'

'I see. Well, we can't keep Spielberg waiting, now, can we?' He made a show of neatly folding his newspaper. Then he stood and smoothed the creases out of his expensive shirt, his eyes roaming a little south of Emily's face. 'So how did it go? Are they gonna make you a star?'

'It went great, thanks,' she lied. 'Fingers crossed.'

'I'll watch this space, then.'

'Yeah.' There was an awkward pause. Emily stacked letters and notepads into useless piles. David flashed her a creepy smile. Why was he hanging around? Didn't he have anything better to do than stare down her top? 'Right, well, I'd better crack on,' she said. 'Make up for all that lost time.'

'Oh, sure, absolutely.' But David didn't move. He tapped his fingers on the desk. 'Actually, Emily?'

'Yes?'

'Can I have a quick word? Meeting room one?' The look he gave her was both patronising and shifty, and it made Emily's heart thump. She knew that look. She'd seen it many times before on other similarly officious faces.

'Sure, of course,' she said, standing up too fast and sending her

office chair spinning into the back wall. She followed David into the meeting room, hoping against hope that this ‘quick word’ was not what it appeared to be.

It was exactly what it appeared to be.

Fired, she thought, when David had finished talking. She couldn’t say it out loud. No matter how many times it happened, it never got any less humiliating. ‘But ...’ she stammered. *No, no, no, I can’t lose this job*. Her frozen thoughts suddenly began to thaw and came pouring out of her mouth. ‘I’m really sorry. It’ll never happen again. I’m actually a super-punctual person. I can prove it. I can do better, I promise. I just need one more chance.’

David shrugged, fake sympathy spreading over his ferrety face like a spill of oil. ‘You know I like you, Emily, but it’s not my decision to make. If it were, you’d have a job for life.’

‘Okay, well, whose decision is it? Maybe you could talk to them for me?’ *Don’t beg*, she told herself. *Surely you’re above begging for a shitty temp job?* But the words kept coming. ‘Maybe I could do something else, something with less responsibility. There must be other things that need doing?’

‘Come now, you don’t need us. Good-looking girl like you?’ David reached out as if to ruffle her hair but thankfully seemed to change his mind at the last minute. ‘I’m sure Hollywood is just falling over itself.’

Emily felt her cheeks burn. Proem was the only thing keeping her afloat. Bookings for temp jobs had been slow lately, and corporate videos and play readings didn’t pay much.

When the ordeal finally came to an end, David patting her shoulder like a headmaster sending her back to class, she returned to the mercifully empty reception area and the desk that was no longer hers. Behind her, the meeting-room door clicked shut

and David's busy footsteps faded away into the recesses of the building. A funereal silence settled like snow.

Well ... fuck. What the hell was she going to do now? The upside of losing her job, of course, was that she would no longer have to pretend to care about filing and making new clients feel welcome. But then again, the rent was due, she was deep into her overdraft and it wasn't likely that she'd get another temp gig straight away. Jamie at the temp agency had mentioned only a few days ago that they were struggling to find enough work for everyone, and getting fired wasn't exactly going to propel her to the top of the list.

She lifted her head and glared at the computer screen. The phone rang but she ignored it. Nope, there was no other option: she'd just have to cook up a good sob story, phone Jamie and throw herself on his mercy.

There was no reason to stay until the end of the day, but the mid-afternoon rush made it impossible to leave. Every time Emily went to pack up her things, someone would approach the desk and issue instructions so forcefully that she found herself unable to explain that technically she no longer worked there. Then a female client arrived for a meeting with a four-year-old in tow and dumped him at Emily's feet like luggage, so then she *really* couldn't go. The poor little boy looked so forlorn that she ended up playing hide-and-seek among the pot plants while simultaneously directing calls and signing for packages.

After a while she began to feel sad. As she watched the well-dressed human traffic flowing steadily through the foyer, she wondered what it *would* be like to have a job for life. Decent

money, security, colleagues, Friday night drinks. It all sounded so *liberating*.

Emily realised then how much she'd enjoyed her six weeks at Proem. She didn't exactly fit in, of course, but people had started to say hi to her in the coffee room, and she'd even been sent a fun little questionnaire for the in-house 'newsletter', whatever that was. *Get to Know Your Team*, the email had said, with a note explaining that her answers would be posted the following week along with her photograph. It had felt nice to be included.

She looked for more excuses to hang around. Buoyed by the attentions of the abandoned little boy, she found increasingly elaborate ways to entertain him: Twenty Questions, magic tricks, a treasure hunt. She swept the floor. The photocopier was beeping; the paper tray was jammed. The coffee machine needed cleaning, the cushions straightening. She wanted to leave the place looking perfect. Maybe someone would realise what a great employee she'd been and call her back. But when the office activity began to wind down and the boy's mother finally appeared to reclaim her shrieking, writhing child (Emily had pumped him full of sugary bribes), she knew it was finally time to go.

Picking up her bag, she took a last look around. Somewhere in a parallel universe, maybe she belonged in a place like this. Maybe there was a version of her walking around in a Stella McCartney outfit and carrying a briefcase.

But back in the lift, she studied her reflection once more. *On second thoughts*, she decided, *probably not*.

SCOTT

The fat nib of the pen was too blunt to penetrate his skin, but Scott Denny was giving it his best shot. He forced it into the centre of his palm, turning it slowly like a screw, first one way and then the other, grinding the metal against his flesh.

It was painful but not nearly enough. He cast his eyes over his meticulously ordered desk, searching for something that might do the job properly. There wasn't a lot to work with. His phone obviously wouldn't do much damage. Neither would the metal prongs of the charger, not even if he pressed really hard. He could maybe crush his fingers with one of the heavy granite statuettes. Or smash the ornate picture frame and use the glass to carve lines into his arm. If he had a stapler handy, he could slam it repeatedly into his thigh.

Too messy, though. Too loud. Too conspicuous.

On the other side of his desk, her slender frame perched delicately on a Danish cherry-wood swivel chair, his executive assistant, Verity, blathered on. Her immaculately manicured nails tapped an irregular beat on the keyboard of her laptop as she made updates to his schedule.

'You've got the managing exec of Alkira-Dunn coming in with her lawyer tomorrow at 8.30, and after that you've got a conference call with the rep for Truss and Boulder. He's hoping we'll finance a buyout. I've already talked to him; he doesn't have

a business plan and we're a bit unclear on competitors, so we need to look at that tonight. And then if you need to run models you've got some time before your lunch meeting. Now, you need to tell me what you want me to do about ...'

She droned on and on.

And under the table, *grind, grind, grind*.

He really should stop. It was going to leave one hell of a mark.

The sky outside, dissected into squares by bronze-mullioned windows, was dishwater grey. Where had the afternoon gone? In just a few hours, the streetlights would start flickering on: a neat line of fire stretching along Grosvenor Street all the way to Hyde Park; a procession of torches lighting the way home for all but the likes of him, the night owls for whom the days were not defined by the rising and setting of the sun but by the opening and closing of global trade.

Scott suddenly registered silence. He looked up. Verity had paused mid-drivel and was giving him an odd look.

'What?' he said.

'Yesterday's start-up. I need to know if you want me to go ahead and contact their director.'

Scott tried to recall the previous day and drew a blank.

'Everything okay?' Verity's doll-like face was rumped with concern.

'Fine.' He smiled thinly. 'Just a few issues at home. Nothing major. Yes, set up a meeting. What else?'

Verity gave him a sideways look and returned to her screen, unconvinced but keen to press on.

Grind, grind, grind.

Beside him on his desk, Scott's phone lit up displaying yet another new message. There was now a neat little queue of them.

Please talk to me ...

Last night I thought ...

We need you, don't ...

I swear if you ...

I fucking hate you ...

Selfish thoughtless cowardly bastard ...

Grind, grind, grind.

He nodded along with whatever Verity was saying, his thoughts drifting further and further away. Images darted bird-like through his mind, swooping and flashing their colours at him. He saw an orange sun peeking through feathery fronds of pampas grass. A wet footprint evaporating on hot polished travertine.

Then a pillow, soft and plump. A delicate finger, pointing.
And stars. A thick blanket of stars across a clear, black sky.

He fought the urge to slap himself. His eyes wandered, seeking an anchor. Through the glass wall of his office he could see the worker bees buzzing from room to room at a time-lapsed pace. Clients came and went. Junior staff members leaned in doorways clutching dainty cups of espresso. And over in reception, a large potted fiddle-leaf fig wobbled as a fully-grown woman tried to wedge herself behind it.

He narrowed his eyes. Was he seeing things? No. His receptionist really was hiding behind a pot plant. Suddenly, a small boy jumped out from under the desk and hopped up and down, pointing with glee at the ill-concealed blonde. She clutched at her chest as if shot, then fell to the ground in a heap. The boy laughed and sat on her head.

Scott removed the pen from his hand.

He watched, entranced, as the receptionist negotiated her way out from under the boy and staved off a second attack with some sort of trick. The child gazed up at her as she produced a small object from behind his ear, and for the first time in a long while, Scott smiled.

There was a soft knock at the door, and both he and Verity turned to see David Mahoney's smarmy little face peeping in. 'Sorry to interrupt,' David said, 'but I just wanted to let you know that it's done. I told her.'

Scott blinked. 'What?'

'The temp on reception. I fired her. As ... as we discussed.' David's eyes slid to Verity, who shrugged.

'Oh.' Scott glanced back towards reception. The young woman was now galloping around and flapping her arms like wings. 'Yes. Good. Thank you.'

David pressed his hand to his heart and pretended to faint. 'Oh god, don't do that to me. For a minute there I thought I'd made a mistake.'

'No. No mistake.'

'Thank heaven for that.' He let out a high-pitched laugh. 'I was worried *I'd* be out the door next!'

Scott stared at him.

'Okay, well, she ought to be packing up her things as we speak.'

'No rush,' Scott murmured. Down the hall, the receptionist was wrapping what looked like a stack of cookies in a napkin. She pressed them into the little boy's hand.

David backed away with an almost courtly bow and the door clicked shut after him. There was a brief pause, during which Verity raised a pencilled eyebrow. 'Dare I ask what she did to offend you?'

Scott said nothing, and Verity went back to her laptop. She knew better than to push him. She resumed her meaningless stream of facts and figures.

And underneath it, a small unpleasant sound.

Tap tap tap.

Scott frowned. It was coming from under the table. A soft, wet rhythm, somewhere near his feet.

Tap tap tap.

Peering down, he saw several tiny dark splashes of blood on the polished concrete. *Well, would you look at that*, he almost said. Clearly, you should never underestimate a blunt instrument.