



THE
DOG
RUNNER

BREN
MACDIBBLE

From the author of *How to Bee*

THE DOG RUNNER



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To all the kids who are not brave
but do brave things anyway.





BE WITH ME WHEN I WAKE UP



Even with my ear pressed to the floor so hard it hurts,
I can't hardly see under Alvie's door.

'Mr Alvie Moore?' I say. 'You still there?'

'Just getting your book, Ella!' he calls, voice all old-raspy.

'Why can't you open the door no more?' I ask.

'Nailed it shut with boards. Ain't no one coming through that door ever again, the way I nailed it shut.'

'But, Mr Alvie Moore, what if there's a fire?' I ask his shuffling slippers through the under-door crack, then sit up to rub my sore ear.

'I'll be barbecue. Don't you worry, I'll open the door

when the army arrives to sort out these streets.’ Alvie tries to shove a book through the crack but it’s too thick and conks against the door. He picks it up, grunts, and then half a paperback, torn right down the spine, slides under the door. I have to wait for the other half to figure out what book he’s lending me. Then the top half with the cover comes sliding under the door. It’s got a splash of black and a splash of red on the cover that looks like blood. ‘Lord of the Flies’ in scary black writing.

‘You read that one, Ella?’ Alvie asks.

‘No,’ I say, picking up the two halves and putting them back together.

‘Good, let me know what you think of it,’ Alvie says.

‘Thank you! See you when the army gets here,’ I say and head back down the stairs, jumping two feet at once, step to step, twenty-two steps to our landing. Emery’s too-big hand-me-down shorts need holding for every bounce. Dad gave me these old Emery clothes when he bagged up and threw out all my clothes, saying I was too big for them, even though some of them fit fine. Now I’ve only got Emery’s old clothes.

There are only three floors in this old building. We’ve got Alvie Moore above, Nontha Mantu below, and us in the middle. Me, Dad, Emery and three dogs, but we’re

not supposed to say about the dogs. And Mum when she comes home. Nontha's good. She never complains about the clacking of the dogs' toenails on the floor above her head.

I open the door and push through the bouncing fur and licking tongues, rubbing each furry head hello, and smooching my cheek into three big fluffy yowling doggo heads, then I tell Dad what Alvie Moore's gone and done to his door.

He laughs and goes back to trying to stick some wires into an old hand crank from what used to be part of an electric bike, but there are so many bits on the kitchen table, I don't think it's gonna ever spit out any electricity. 'The army? He's waiting for the army? Someone needs to tell that old man an army marches on its stomach, so Australia's got no army!' he says.

'Don't we gotta go and get him out?' I ask. 'What if there's a fire?'

'I'm not sure nailing the door shut isn't a bad idea. The world's turned upside down, Baby Bell, if we wanna survive, we've all got to figure out...'

'How to walk on our heads!' I shout, finishing it for him coz he's said it so many times.

Dad rubs my hair, still stiff and spiky-short from

where he cut it with his shaver last week, so I look like a pale version of Emery.

‘What book did you get?’ He picks the two pieces out of my hands and turns them over. ‘Oh,’ he says, his smile sliding away.

‘What?’ I ask, with him already moving to put the pieces on the top shelf of the bookcase where he thinks I can’t reach.

‘It’s not appropriate,’ he says.

‘I’ve read the appropriate ones,’ I say. ‘There’s nothing in the building left for me to read!’

‘Yeah, but not that. It’s too scary for you.’

‘But Dad!’ I say. ‘I’m not a baby. If it gets too scary, I’ll stop reading!’

‘Sweetie, there’s enough society breaking down outside our door without reading about it for fun.’

‘Can I read it then?’ Emery calls from his bedroom.

Dad rolls his eyes at me and doesn’t answer. Sometimes Emery says stuff just to make people argue with him. But not me. He never argues with me, coz I’m the little sister and he’s the big brother, and he looks out for me, no matter what.

‘Can I?’ Emery yells again.

Dad puts his finger to his lips, ducks down and hides

behind the couch. He's skinny and small, our dad, so he can fold himself down real good.

Maroochy, our biggest black dog, follows him, and Wolf tries to too, but there's not much room down there. A fluffy wagging brown tail is sticking out. Dad waves a hand for me to hide, so I duck behind the armchair, and when Bear comes licking at my face, I wrap myself around him to scrunch him in there too.

There's a huffing and bare feet slapping on the floor tiles as Emery comes out to see why we're not answering. He comes all the way into the lounge room.

'I can see you!' he says.

Dad leaps out then, yelling, 'Dog pile!' He grabs Emery, pulls him onto the couch, Emery wailing and squirming as Dad and me and two big dogs pile on top, giggling and laughing and whining. I bounce off pretty quick coz I weigh even less than the dogs. I leap back on top again.

Maroochy though, she's trying to save Emery from the pile. She's got his jeans leg and is tugging it out from under the pile.

We roll off and Emery slides off the couch and goes skating across the floor with Maroochy tug, tug, tugging him.

‘Roochy!’ Emery yells, too busy holding his jeans up to stop the slide.

‘She saved you!’ I yell. ‘Good, Roochy!’

She stops dragging and dances around like she’s the best, and she really is. I wrap my arms around her big neck and bury my face in her fur, and Emery does too.

‘You’re a big goose,’ Emery says. Then he grabs me and carries me to the couch and drops me down and plonks down beside me. Dogs scramble up on top of us, Dad plops down beside us.

‘We’re a goosey family!’ Dad says and laughs.

But I don’t laugh coz we’re not a family without Mum. ‘We will be when mother goose gets home,’ I say.

‘Mother Goose is something from a kid’s book,’ Emery says.

‘I mean our mother goose, Mum, you goose.’

I dig my elbow into Emery’s side and he squirms, and mutters, ‘Not my mum,’ like it’s a habit he can’t stop. Dad gives him a quick eyebrow tweak to tell him he’s annoying.

‘Why can’t she come home now the power’s gone out?’ I ask Dad, coz that’s her job, to keep the power working, that’s why she’s away from home. But if there’s no power for her to keep going, she can come home.

‘I’m sure she’s on her way, Baby Bell,’ Dad says, and wraps a skinny arm around me. His arms are skinny but all muscle, so his hugs are strong. ‘The gates are down across the city. I’m sure there’s a way for her to get home now.’

‘But how?’ I ask, coz the city was divided up into a lot of burbs when the food ran out, and rations had to be delivered to each gate, and the only people allowed to leave where they worked that day were the people who were not ‘Essential Personnel’. A whole lot of doctors and nurses and policemen and power employees haven’t come home to their families for eight months. And since the power went out three weeks ago, there’s not even been phone calls.

‘You know your mum,’ Dad says. ‘She’s probably got a solar-powered armoured car smashing down the rubbish in the streets right now.’

I laugh at the idea, and even Emery laughs, coz that’s the thing about Mum, she’s always designing, dreaming, working. That’s how come she got into solar power early when Dad was still learning coal power, and how they met when she took over his job. They tell us the story all the time. I think to warn us to always be looking ahead. Emery thinks the story makes Dad look stupid, but Dad

made a nice business from home, fixing old electrical things, and he was around to look after me, and Emery when Emery's mum sent him back to the city to live. Dad's better with kids than Mum. She never could slow down enough to just hang out.

Every morning I wake up and think today's the day Mum will make it home. But every night when I go to sleep, the noises down in the street of people out of control is louder and louder, and I wonder how Mum is gonna get through all that to be with me when I wake up.





ME, EMERY AND THREE BIG DOGGOS



Screams in the night. Far away and lonely. Angry shouts. Slamming doors. Breaking glass. A man runs down the street below us, boots thudding on the road, something shiny in his hand flashes as he passes under our only solar street light.

Me, I freeze to stop from breathing in, coz it wouldn't be just a breath, it'd be a sob that sets me crying, and I have to be calm. It's the same as every night out there. But this time, I've not got Dad or Emery here to look out for me.

Maroochy, beside me, growls, puts her paw on the window and stares down, twisting her head, following

the man running on, like she thinks he ain't s'posed to be out there after the curfew sirens have sounded.

'It's okay, Roochy,' I whisper, and bury my hand deep in the warm fur of her neck. Not allowed to cry, Emery said. Maroochy will be worried. You have to look out for Maroochy, he said, like I'm stupid enough to believe that. He left Maroochy here to guard me, that's for sure. I just nodded, couldn't say a thing, and he slipped out the door, leaving me here alone, 'cept for Rooch. Him going out into the city, just like Dad did twelve days ago, just like Mum did eight months ago.

'He'll come back,' I whisper into Maroochy's fuzzy triangle ear. 'They'll all come back.' But it's already gone dark, and that's when Emery said he'd be back.

Curfew's not even a thing now, even with sirens blaring at seven every night, and me wondering every single time how they still got power. The barriers around the suburbs are broken down. No guards are standing there to stop night-time looters no more. Dad said they'd run to save their own necks and we should too, soon as Mum gets here. Emery said Mum could take care of herself. She was probably safe somewhere anyway. Emery said we don't need to wait for her. He said he wasn't going to wait for Jackie one day more. I heard them talking at

night when they thought I was sleeping. Emery said he had to get to his grandad, coz his Ba knew about grass and the land and stuff and he needed Emery to help him. Emery said he'd go alone. Dad was angry, but he said he'd go get Mum then we could leave together. Dad said the government was promising us food that they can't get hold of, and the city was just gonna break down when it didn't show up.

Down the street, where the ethanol bus ground to a stop last year and nobody bothered moving it, someone lights a fire in the old ripped-off car bonnet. It's real dark except for that one solar light and the sparking fire. People come out of houses up the street looking this way and that, like they don't trust no one, carrying pots of water to put on the old shopping trolley tipped sideways that we use for a grille in the middle of that car-bonnet fire. Adding old bits of furniture they don't want, to keep the fire going. They don't bring out what food they got now though, nobody trusting nobody no more in case they take it for themselves. Better to eat that can of fish just stood heating in the boiling water than have someone smell it cooking and snatch it away.

Used to be me and Emery down there at the fire too, talking to the neighbours, playing ball with our

dogs under street lights when we had them, but then the government stopped delivering food parcels so often, no more cans of fish, no more dried soup bones and vegetables. Dad said we shouldn't let anyone know we got the dogs still, him playing ball with them on the stairs and sneaking them down to pee and poop in the little backyard after checking no one was around to see.

So it was me, Dad, and Emery, and our three big doggos in a tiny upstairs flat day after day coz Dad didn't want us going to school, ever since the suburbs were fenced off from each other, after Mum went out to work and couldn't get back in.

It's been so long since I been to school. Lucky for me, I got my reading going good, coz with no power and nowhere to play, it's just me carrying books upstairs to old Alvie Moore or downstairs to Nontha Mantu to see if they got some books to swap that maybe I can read.

Some days, I wish I could go to school to see my friends and use the swings, but Dad says I always gotta be ready to do as he tells me, coz that's the only way he can keep us all safe.

'Soon as he gets back, I'll do whatever he tells me,' I whisper to Maroochy, coz there's no one but her keeping me safe right now.

I kick at the backpack by my feet, waiting for me to haul on. Most of it's taken up by a beautiful tin of Anzac bickies I been saving, but my boot toe don't hit the tin. I get down on the floor and shove my hand in the backpack, feeling all around past my two changes of clothes and my toothbrush. Only some little cans of sardines. Emery's taken my Anzacs to trade. I dunno what's better to trade for than a big tin of bickies. My face gets real hot that he didn't even ask me or tell me what he'd be trading them for. Him just going off trading for both of us like he's the adult and I'm a baby.

My belly grumbles like it knows already it won't be getting Anzacs ever again.

That ugly red fungus killed all the wheat for flour, killed all the oats, killed the sugar cane for sugar and golden syrup, along with all the grass for cows and butter. Killed just about every ingredient that me and Dad used when we made Anzac bickies. I don't think I'll ever see another Anzac bickie in my whole life.

I find a tube of toothpaste, open it and smear it on my teeth, suck it off. I get another fingerful for Maroochy, who licks it and keeps making licking noises as she tries to deal with stuff that's not really food. Both of us sitting in the dark, sucking at our teeth, worrying.

Maroochy's dark eyes flash in the light from the fire down the street as she waves her head around chasing toothpaste on her muzzle. Poor Maroochy. She don't understand why we can't feed her more than a can of sardines a day. She don't know why that rush of raw meat stopped coming. After the grass died from that ugly red fungus, we had a lot of starving sheep and cows that needed eating, and it was fine times for Maroochy all right. She got fat, her black fur shiny and glossy like crow feathers, even as the world changed all around us. But now that's gone, and we're all just living on our own fat and whatever else we've saved to get us through. Me, Emery, and three big doggos.

'We're gonna starve if we stay here,' Emery said. 'If we're gonna go, best go now.' And he said it like going was something easy. Like all we have to do is walk away.



Praise for *The Dog Runner*:

'The Dog Runner is a non-stop adventure which will entertain as much as it will provoke thought about the importance of looking after our planet and how we should be doing this now – not waiting until it's too late.' – Victoria Dilly, TheBookActivist blog

'a fast-paced adventure novel, about adaptability, the importance of kindness, and a showcase for children's hope in the future of the planet.'

– Claire Zinkin, MinervaReads blog

'The Dog Runner is a tense, thrilling adventure story full of close calls and peril, but it's also glowing with heart, whether it's the relationship between Ella and Emery or their love for the "doggos" helping them get to where they need to be. The all-too timely reminders about the importance of the environment and food security, Bren MacDibble's distinctive writing style, and the delicious sense of threat make The Dog Runner hard to resist.'

– Booktrust

'Resilience and resourcefulness are essential in this enthralling, fast-paced ecological drama.'
– Shortlisting citation for New Zealand Book Awards for Children and Young Adults, 2019

Also by Bren MacDibble

How to Bee

ISBN: 9781910646441

Nine year-old Peony lives in a shack in the orchard and dreams of becoming the best 'bee' the farm has ever seen, scrambling through the fruit trees to pollinate by hand with feather wands. She has love, she has enough to eat and if she could just become a 'bee' she'd be super-cherries happy. But her mother wants her to live in the city, where all the fruit is sent.

Torn between two different worlds, Peony fights to protect her family and the world she loves.

'This powerful, engrossing and engaging novel is a great introduction to dystopian fiction and tackles environmental issues, poverty, social inequality and problematic family relationships. Peony is a strong and inspiring protagonist and, despite some of the darker themes, this is a story filled with hope, as unlikely friendships blossom and a strong sense of loyalty prevails.'

- Seven Stories, The National Centre for Children's Books

'Quirky, original and heartfelt, this is an all too plausible dystopian adventure, exploring themes of family loyalty and the environment.'

- Fiona Noble, The Bookseller

'How to Bee is a moving, intelligent novel, offering plenty of food for thought and a cast of appealing- and not so appealing - characters which linger with you long after the story is finished...'

- North Somerset Teachers' Book Award

First UK edition Old Barn Books Ltd 2019
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ISBN: 9781910646649

Cover and text design by Jo Hunt

Printed in Denmark

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