



RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

GIRL NEXT DOOR

by **ALYSSA BRUGMAN**

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Belt tightening

'I could die tonight. This might be the last time we see each other. I just want you to know what an important friend you are to me.' Declan blinks at me with moist eyelashes and sighs. 'I never saw Buenos Aires.'

'After I finish school I'll take a year off and go to South America in your honour,' I tell him, patting his forearm.

We're sitting in the narrow alleyway between Declan's house and my house, where nobody can hear us. It's about ten minutes to dinner. Well, until Declan's dinner. My family doesn't do that meal any more. My mum car-pools into the city with Declan's dad, and he's some kind of hot shot, so she's usually home late. She's home tonight though. She has an appointment.

A car pulls up in front of our house. A thin man in a short-sleeved shirt checks himself out in the rear-view mirror and then gets out.

'There's a man walking up your front path,' Declan says.

'Yes, I can see that.' He would be the appointment, I'm guessing.

Declan flicks his head. He does this a lot because he likes to wear his hair over his eyes. He's bleached and dyed it so many times that it's brittle and coarse. He thinks it makes him look mysterious. I think he looks like a terrier.

'I'm dying and you've already lost interest. You're already too busy with Mr . . .' He's searching. 'Mr Pathwalker.'

'You never know,' I say. 'You might make it through tonight, and the next night and every night, and then we could go to South America together.'

Declan eyes me suspiciously. 'Will you promise to look after my cat? Because if you don't, when I die I will haunt you!' he warns.

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‘Of course,’ I answer. ‘I’ve told you a hundred times.’

I’m not really an animal person. We had goldfish a while ago, but I wasn’t all that good at feeding them regularly. I’d prefer to be haunted by Declan than by Chairman Meow – or the goldfish. They would be so mad at me.

‘Jenna-Belle!’ Mum calls from inside the house.

‘What?’ I shout over my shoulder. We wait. My mother is expecting me to go in there to see what she wants. She calls me as if I’m a dog.

‘WHAT?’ I yell again.

Still nothing.

‘Declan could be dying!’ I bellow. ‘Don’t you even care about that?’

‘Declan is *not* dying!’ Mum shouts back.

It’s true. Declan’s not dying, he’s just an emo.

‘I have to go.’ I stand up.

Declan doesn’t say anything. He’s too busy checking his pulse.

Inside, the man from the car is standing in the foyer with his hands in the pockets of his jeans. We have one of those entry foyers with the staircase winding up and a skylight at the top. The vast space and the tiles make your shoes clack and echo through the whole house, so if you’re going to sneak out you need to do it through the back.

He’s looking at the ceiling. Maybe he’s thinking about the roof space. I’ve always liked roof spaces. Declan and I spend a lot of time in my roof. When I go to people’s houses I always wonder if there’s treasure up there.

When I’m an A-lister I’m going to make a habit of leaving treasure in people’s roofs, like the way Oprah gives her audience cars.

‘Bryce Cole is here to look around,’ my mother tells me. ‘He might take the room.’ I have a vision of him hefting our lounge room on his shoulder, like Atlas, and strapping it to the roof of his car, which isn’t as dumb as you might think since Mum has sold just about everything else, and then it registers that she means the spare room. Bryce Cole might be moving in.

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'This is Jenna-Belle, my youngest,' she tells him.

He offers me his hand. 'Bryce Cole.' He's not looking at me as though he only sees a jigsaw of girlie bits the way some men do, with their eyes flitting from one part to the next. He's just looking at my face.

I'm trying to think of any dictators in history with two-syllable names. When you share a bathroom with an adult they can get a little despotic, as if they have more right to it than you, even if you were there first.

I used to have big barneys with the woman who had Bryce Cole's room before. She would scream that she paid, and so I'd scream back that she paid for the room, she only had *use* of the bathroom. So there. Her name was Penelope Sullivan – four and three syllables – so she was obviously Napoleon Bonaparte reincarnated.

I'm doing well with Bryce Cole until I remember Pol Pot.

Pol Pot springs to mind because Declan did an assignment on him for history. He read on the internet that Pol Pot was a dope fiend and that's where the expression 'pot' for marijuana came from, but I don't think that's true. I'll have to ask him what mark he got.

I'm not sure if Bryce Cole can be Pol Pot reincarnated because I don't know if Pol Pot is dead yet, and even if he is, I'm pretty sure he was raining atrocities on his people after Bryce Cole was born. You can't be reincarnated retrospectively; otherwise we'd all be fair game. Who could sleep knowing you could wake up and be someone else? Everyone would be irritable and jumpy and there'd be even more wars.

Bryce Cole doesn't look like a dictator or a pot head. He looks kind of normal. I bet he runs a carpet shop, or delivers photocopiers or something like that, but it's hard to tell at first. He'll be the third flatmate we've had (not including Annie who lives in the granny flat).

I'm beginning to suspect that adults who get to a place in life where they need to rent rooms in other people's houses are all a little kooky. I'm not talking about the uni-types. Mum won't have them because she believes they would corrupt my brother and me – nor backpackers, because Mum thinks they'll steal our stuff and disappear. I'm talking about proper adults with frown lines, who listen to Radio National. They wear shapeless clothes in drab colours, and have the types of haircuts that don't need any styling, which is why I question their need for so much bathroom time.

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Maybe it's a bowel thing.

We live in a monster house – I'm talking truly ginormous, with a billiard room, a bar, a media room and a foyer. It's a house with wings.

It's not as big as Jasmina Fitzgibbon's house. Her dad is some kind of billionaire property developer and they have a helipad and a ballroom with a grand piano in the corner. I appreciate that her dad travels a lot by helicopter, but I do question whether they host so many balls at their house that they need a special room for them.

The Fitzgibbons have staff. We don't have staff. Jasmina also has a stepmother who's about twenty-three. Jasmina tells us stories about the dumb step mother all the time and it's funny because it's such a cliché and I thought she made half of it up, but then one day I saw the stepmother in real life when she came to pick up Jasmina from school and she looked exactly the way Jasmina described. At the time I was so glad that my dad was still with my mum and that they're the same age and that my dad doesn't have a pathetic comb-over – not that there is a non-pathetic comb-over.

Tanner Hamrick-Gough has a house that's about as big as ours, but it's olde worlde with ivy on the walls, and a garden that people take photos of and put in magazines. Her house is a genuine contender for having treasure in the ceiling. It has secret doors and passageways – well, just one off the library, but it's so cool. If I wasn't so mature and chic I would definitely want to play a game of smugglers, or vampires, or something like that.

Okay, I *have* thought about the secret room a little bit. Except I wondered if their cleaner goes in there and vacuums, which would make it less mysterious.

Tanner Hamrick-Gough's mum and dad are still together, and they're so old that they both have combovers. They live in Dubai for half the year. Tanner lives most of the time just with her older sister, which sounds as though it could be a riot, except the sister is doing a PhD in ancient Polynesian nose-flute music, or something like that, so you can imagine. She's not exactly an A-lister.

I used to feel all smug because our family had a giant house without a ballroom, which is just tacky, and my parents had a functioning marriage and two full heads of hair and were actually in the country most of the time, and if they weren't then my brother and I were with them on holidays, and my

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brother Willem is a cadet, which is annoying, but much less annoying than a nose-flautist.

But now we're eating two-minute noodles and canned soup. We don't run the air conditioner any more. I caught Mum dyeing some clothes to make them look new again. She'd already put a lock on the phone so we can only receive calls. And we're renting out our spare rooms.

She bought our school shoes from Vinnies. There were two ways of dealing with that. I could have been mortified, but instead I put on my face that Mum calls 'bolshie' and showed them to everyone at school and told them they were 'vintage'.

We're tightening our belts.

See, what happened was, our lives were going really well. About a year ago, or maybe a little longer, my mum got a promotion, so she was earning all this extra money, and then my parents had a great idea that Dad would start his own business, but the mortgage broker said that banks don't like to lend you money when you're just starting out on your own, so they should borrow it now (as in, then), while Dad had a long record of full-time employment.

They borrowed as much as they could, because Dad was going to earn much more money when he was his own boss. We moved from a big house into the monster house. My brother and I were enrolled into snootier private schools. Dad bought a new car for his company, and then he quit his job.

. . . Except he didn't make more money than he would have if he'd kept his old job. To start up his business he had to pay workers' compensation insurance, indemnity insurance, superannuation, income tax and he had to register for GST. I know all this because in the beginning, when it was exciting and new, they told me everything. Dad said I was witnessing the birth of an empire.

For the first six months or so he was up early, in his office with a mug of coffee in one hand and the phone in the other. Then he started getting up later and later, until eventually I'd come home from school and he'd be lying on the lounge in his boxers watching the Lifestyle channel with a packet of chicken chips balanced on his belly.

This went on for a few more months, and then one afternoon I told him I was witnessing the birth of a fat, lazy slob. Then I saw the employment section of the newspaper open on the coffee table, and I felt bad, because it looked like he was trying.

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But you know what? He didn't get angry. It was so freaky. I was expecting him to give me a lecture, but instead he cried. There were tears rolling down his cheeks, and he was making small whimpering noises like a puppy, but the whole time he kept watching this guy on the television transforming an old patio into an 'entertainment deck'.

He cried for ages and then when Mum got home from work she sat me down in the kitchen and told me I was going to have a little brother or sister. Of course, there was going to be a gap between the time when she had the baby and went back to work where she wasn't going to be making any money, so we'd have even less than we had before her promotion. (Back when we had a house that we could almost afford.) She explained this to me in small words. The 'little brother or sister' conversation was the moment she started talking to me as if I was a four-year-old.

After that, Dad 'went to the country'. Jasmina and Tanner and I considered what 'gone to the country' might mean. Is it the same place they take sick dogs? Is it code for 'shacked up with his old secretary'? Is he in a mental institution? Rehab? Has he joined a cult? Is he a bigamist with a whole separate family? Any of those would be a good explanation. It's been two months now since he left, and I still don't know what it means.

Mum hasn't called the police. Willem keeps talking about 'when Dad comes home' as though it's a sure thing. Declan says that my dad's in hospital with cancer and they don't want to tell me because I have delicate self-esteem. Everyone's always dying as far as Declan is concerned.

He's onto something with the self-esteem thing, though. My mother has an obsession with it, as if it's a religion or something. Actually, she thinks of it more like oxygen. You don't want your self-esteem levels to get too low or you might pass out.

Back in the old days, when we had meals, and pay TV, and friends, before Mum was pregnant and my dad disappeared, Mum thought you could buy self-esteem. You'd go to the shopping centre to stock up on self-esteem the same way you do when you're low on rice or pasta sauces. We'd go to the Estée Lauder counter and get a makeover, then head upstairs to the shoes. Next, I'd get a pedicure while Mum had her nails infilled, and voila!

Maybe she still thinks you can buy it, but she doesn't say anything because we've got no money, and even mentioning it might make me feel bad about myself, which would lower the self-esteem reserves even before the starvation kicks in.

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Instead she says nothing, or compensates by showering me with compliments, even when she's angry.

I'm really disappointed that you didn't pack the dishwasher when I asked you, Jenna-Belle, because you're a strong and beautiful person, with high standards and a responsible attitude.

I don't know why she thinks I have low self-esteem anyway. I'm pretty happy with myself. If I'm absolutely honest I'd have to say that I'm a bit of all right. But maybe it's Mum's rationalisation to herself for me turning out to be not quite as pretty, or clever, or good at sports as she was hoping I would? Maybe she thinks that if I had higher self-esteem I would be a maths genius and a leggy sports queen who never gets sweaty, and then she would feel like a success as a parent?

I've tried to raise this with her, but she still just talks to me as if I'm a four-year-old. That's when she talks to me at all, which is less and less lately. Hello!

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