

Billy Jones and
the Planet Bomb

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ISBN: 9781916423008

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to every young person who dreams,
like I did, of being a spaceman.

And, of course, to my wonderful wife, Sandra, who would
tell me off if she didn't get a mention!

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	i
1 Dad's Shed	1
2 Kitten on the Moon	13
3 We don't like you!	25
4 What breach of security?	36
5 Neat space stuff	41
6 A real live spaceship	50
7 Buzzing on the bridge	59
8 The Academy	66
9 Briefing	73
10 Assessment and Mods	79
11 A conversation with the Admiral	89
12 Lessons begin. What does 'Didactic' mean?	95
13 Let's see what you can do	102
14 Zero-G training	108
15 Floatball	116
16 You can't bully me	129
17 Am I in trouble?	134
18 Trials	141
19 Building a space station	145
20 Ouch, my tail!	153
21 Visiting home. Christmas term Break	159
22 A Nice game of Floatball	168
23 Lectures on Galactic diplomacy	179
24 Don't cry over spilt nutritional fluid	189
25 Someone is acting suspiciously	197
26 They've stolen one!	204
27 Sixty seconds to what?	211
28 Certain death	214
29 We still hate you	218
30 Questions Answered	226
31 Going Home	230

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to my long suffering younger children Shaun and Samuel, who sometimes must have thought I preferred Billy Jones to them, and to my two elder boys John and James for being my initial proof readers and giving me invaluable feedback. Thanks also to the children of the 2017-18 year six cohort of Lakey Lane Primary school who were the first batch of kids to read this, and whose appreciation gave me the strength and confidence to publish.

1 DAD'S SHED

It was Tommy's fault that Billy Jones needed to break into his Dad's shed.

It all started with the doorbell ringing and Billy sprinting to the door, yanking it open to reveal his friend, clutching a present wrapped in blue wrapping paper adorned with pictures of spaceships.

'Happy Birthday Billy!'

The gift was thrust forward into Billy's hands. Stuck to the top of it was a card in a blue envelope sporting a badly scrawled 'Billy'.

'Thanks Tommy!' Billy snatched the large box with a lopsided grin and turned, heading to the front room. Over his shoulder he called, 'Don't just stand there, come in then.'

Tommy hurried in through the porch, his mother reminding him from outside on the driveway, 'Now behave while you're here, Tommy! Oh, hello Lisa. Is Billy having a nice day?' Billy's Mum had materialised at the door somehow.

As the Mums no doubt started talking absolute drivel in the doorway, in the sitting room Billy ripped the card off and opened it. 'Is there money in it?' he asked.

'Don't be stupid,' Tommy replied, 'You've got a present. You ain't getting money as well!'

The card displayed the words 'You are 11' over the cartoon picture of a spaceman. Billy shrugged as the card floated down to the rug and turned his attention to the box.

Tommy gazed around the room, his eyes flitting between the sofas, the iron stove in the fireplace, the wooden floors and the huge TV dominating one corner. The room was immaculately tidy, with nothing out of place. There were only a few ornaments on the mantelpiece above the fireplace and one or two pictures on the wall, mainly of Billy as a baby.

Ignoring his friend, shards of paper fluttered to the floor about Billy's feet, before he exclaimed, 'Oh that's cool. Thanks Tommy.' Having stripped all the paper, the gift was revealed as a build-it-yourself toy robot arm.

Billy's Mum appeared at the door. 'What have you got there? Oh Billy, pick up this mess!'

'I was gonna! Anyway, it's my birthday.' Turning to Tommy with a growing smile, he added, 'Do you want to meet my dog. He's in the garden!'

'The famous Wiggy you keep going on about!' Tommy nodded enthusiastically.

'C'mon then!'

Dropping the box onto a sofa, the pair thundered out past Billy's Mum. 'Billy, pick up this mess,' she repeated at their disappearing backs, before muttering, 'God give me strength,' and heading towards the shredded paper littering

the floor.

Billy opened the back door and was rewarded by the usual reaction of a dog that hasn't seen one of its owners for over ten seconds. The scruffy little Yorkshire Terrier stopped gnawing on a slipper and hurtled, barking insanely, towards him. 'Wiggy, good boy, good boy!' Billy grinned at the animal as he bent down to pick it up, its tongue slavering his chin.

Tommy laughed. 'You're right, mate. Good name. It does look exactly like a wig on legs!'

'Don't let the dog in or it'll be after my slippers again!' Billy's Mum's voice echoed through the house.

'Okay Mum!' Billy called back, looking at the ripped item on the ground and, with a cheeky wink at Tommy, the pair went into the garden.

'Let's have a bounce on my trampoline!' Billy suggested.

As they headed out, Tommy scanned the garden and frowned as he noticed a shed, badly hidden behind a row of small trees. 'Blimey, that's a big shed!'

'Is it?' Billy hadn't thought there was anything odd about the shed. It was just the shed. It'd always been like it was, so it had never occurred to him to think there was anything wrong with it.

Ignoring the trampoline, Tommy went up to it, pushing past the trees surrounding it and, after looking hard at it for a second, gave it a kick. 'Ouch!' he said. 'It feels like it's made of brick or somefn!'

'It's just the shed.' Billy frowned at Tommy's reaction. It was a huge shed, Billy had to admit to himself. About half the width of the garden, with big double doors. Billy gave it an experimental poke with his own foot. It didn't

budge a millimetre. He rapped it with his knuckles as Tommy looked on and then agreed with his friend. 'Yeah, you're right. It feels like there's metal under that wood.'

'Was' in it?' Tommy wanted to know.

'I dunno. I'm not allowed in it and Dad doesn't usually go in when I'm there.'

'It ain't got no windows, neither,' muttered Tommy, walking round it. Again, this fact had never previously dawned on Billy and, his ears warming with embarrassment, he followed Tommy between the shed and the fence and back to the front, Wiggy scampering happily after them.

The two boys both stared at the huge six-digit padlock hanging in the heavy metal latch, and exchanged glances. 'You're Dad is hiding something in there, that's for sure,' Tommy nodded. 'Was'is job, again?'

Billy shook his head. 'He sells sofas, tables and chairs.'

'Who to?'

Billy pulled a face. 'I don't know! Big sofa, table and chair shops, I guess. He travels a lot, all round the country. He doesn't even go in the shed very much.'

'You could hide a lot of sofas in that shed.' Tommy sounded just a little too snide for Billy's liking.

'My Dad's not a thief!'

Although he was defending his Dad, Billy now just couldn't figure out why his Dad needed a shed like that.

'How do you know if you don' know was'in it?' Billy squirmed under Tommy's accusing gaze. 'Was' the combination, d'you know?'

'No,' Billy shook his head. 'Dad takes the padlock in with him and bolts the shed from the inside.'

Tommy just paused and gave Billy another knowing

look. 'C'mon Billy, you're normally the really nose-y one, not me.'

Billy clenched his fists until his knuckles whitened, and ground his teeth so hard Tommy actually heard it. He couldn't tell if his anger was directed at Tommy, the shed or his parents, but he lifted his leg and gave the shed a hard kick with the flat of his foot. It didn't move at all and made a dull thudding noise. He might as well have kicked the house. He kicked it again, even harder. Tommy joined in and, for about ten seconds, the two of them enthusiastically tried to kick a hole in the front of the shed while Wiggy bounced up and down and barked his fuzzy head off. They only stopped when Billy's Mum came out to investigate the racket and hurried up the garden, shouting, 'Oi, you two, stop!'

They looked sheepishly at her as she stormed up the garden, demanding, 'What on earth do you think you're playing at? If your Dad knew you were kicking his shed like that, well, you'd be in more trouble than I think you've ever been in!'

While he blushed and his insides did a little dance, Mum's words also made Billy all the more curious. 'Sorry!' he muttered, staring at his feet, before looking up and adding, 'Why? What's in it?'

Mum had an odd reaction, seeing as she was telling them off. She broke eye contact and her tone of voice fell, like she had said something she shouldn't have. 'Never you mind what's in it. Sharp stuff like saws and shears that a boy like you shouldn't be playing with, that's all.'

Billy's leg bones were still vibrating from kicking something so hard as that shed, so he didn't believe her for a second!

‘C’mon Mum, what really in it?’

Mum swallowed and blushed. ‘You boys just stay away from that shed, do you understand?’ Billy opened his mouth to protest but was cut off by a hand motion as her voice gained volume again. ‘I mean it Billy. You so much as touch that shed and Tommy goes straight home you’re grounded for the rest of the summer holidays. That’s not a threat, that’s a promise. Do you understand?’

Billy nodded. Out of the corner of his eye, he was sure he could see Tommy’s lips pressed hard together and his chest vibrating with a suppressed giggle.

They stood unmoving in front of the shed doors as Billy’s Mum gave them a hard stare, before heading back into the house and giving them one last suspicious look before entering in the back door.

When she was safely out of earshot, Billy turned to his friend. ‘You’re right,’ he nodded. ‘Mum and Dad are hiding something in there, and I’m going to find out what!’

‘Now that’s the Billy Jones who’s gotten me six detentions in the last term alone. You just make sure you tell me when you find out.’

Billy grinned back. ‘Is it six? You can’t really count that telling off over the bog paper on the ceiling in the loos?’

‘It was all lunchtime, so it counts. Mind you, the one over the toy spider in the girls’ sink was worth it!’

Billy chuckled. ‘Yeah, I can still hear Lizzie’s screams even now!’

They wandered off to play on the trampoline. As they kicked off their shoes next to it, Billy looked at the shed thoughtfully.

‘Why do grown-ups do that to us?’ he wondered out loud.

‘What?’ Tommy cocked his head to one side as he sat on the edge of the trampoline.

‘Lie to us, all the time. We may be kids, but we’re not idiots. You know, all the ‘this won’t hurt’ and ‘we’re almost there’ stuff. Mum’s lying about what’s in the shed. Don’t they know we can tell the difference between truth and stuff they say just to get us to do what they want? It’s not fair!’

Tommy nodded in agreement. ‘I still haven’t forgiven my parents for the whole ‘tooth-fairy’ thing a few years ago.’

‘It’s not just to us, though. They lie to each other all the time, but if we do it, boy are we in trouble. I’m not going to believe anything a grown-up says from now on unless it sounds true. And whatever it is Dad is hiding in that shed, I’m gonna find out!’

Tommy punched him in the arm, a little too hard. ‘Go for it!’ he said.

‘Ow!’ Billy grabbed Tommy and pulled him physically onto the trampoline while Wiggy barked at the pair of them.

...

A few days later, Billy lay on his bed in his room, blasting happily away at aliens on his games console, headset on, chatting to his on-line friends, when Mum shouted upstairs.

‘Billy! You’ve been locked in that bomb-site of a room for too long today. You need to go outside and play in the garden. It’s a lovely day.’

‘Okay!’ Billy shouted back. He had no intention of

moving, certainly not until he had at least completed this mission. His mates were depending on him as he had the medical pack and the sniper rifle.

A short while later, Mum called again. 'Billy, I mean it! Come outside and enjoy the garden.'

'Coming,' he replied, not otherwise budging a muscle as he took down some tall thin creature with a really neat long-range shot to the head.

'Billy?' Mum shouted again after a minute. 'This time Billy didn't even reply. He had the enemy's flag and was sprinting through a maze of corridors towards his own base, with an on-line Tommy (TomKilz97) and someone called AlienNem28 protecting him. He had almost got there when the game froze and a very unhelpful message appeared on his TV screen telling him 'No Internet detected. Check your connection.'

'Nooo!' he shouted, stabbing pointlessly at the buttons on his controller, the shouts of his friends in his headphones suddenly cut-off. He leapt off his bed and into the landing, leant over the banister and called down stairs, 'Dad! There's something wrong with the internet!'

He heard a laugh in reply and his Dad, who had finally come home that morning from wherever he went when he was 'away on business', replied. 'No Billy. The 'off' switch on the router seems to work just fine!'

'Aw, that is so unfair!' Defeated, Billy threw his games controller onto his bed, stomped downstairs and went outside, for want of anything else to do.

After a few minutes, he discovered he was actually enjoying himself!

He was bouncing on his big trampoline, with Mum squirting him with the garden hose while she was watering

the plants. Billy loved this game. Mum would turn around from the plants and send a jet of water his way, and he would try to avoid it. The sun was oven-like that day, so it didn't matter if he got a bit wet. Billy laughed and squealed and bounced, and Mum's smile stretched from ear to ear, giggling herself when a jet of water hit him in the head and plastered some of his curly mop of blonde straw-like hair to his head.

Even the dog was smiling, or at least yapping happily under the trampoline and jumping up at Billy as he bounced down. Dad came out of the house, and Mum took a shot at him too, which he avoided with ease, but he chuckled as well.

'Don't get me wet,' he said to Mum, 'I've just got to check something out in the shed for a few minutes. I won't be long.'

Mum's face fell, and she sighed. 'Okay, dear, but don't be too long. Lunch is in 20 minutes.'

Dad unlocked the shed and went in while Billy bounced, wondering what on Earth could Dad do in a shed for 20 minutes and watching to see if he could get a glimpse inside. He couldn't, but he did notice that Dad had left the padlock unlocked on the outside catch, and not taken it in with him.

Billy knew enough about padlocks to know that if they were unlocked, they were showing the unlock code, so as soon as he saw the door was shut and Mum wasn't looking, he slid off the trampoline and sprinted to the shed, Wiggy hot on his heels. The combination was easily visible as 876,678, dead simple to remember too. He almost tripped over Wiggy as he quickly changed direction and got back to the trampoline as Mum turned round with

the hose again.

It was then just a question of waiting for the right time. Dad reappeared after just ten minutes and spent until lunch on the trampoline with Billy, bouncing him high into the air and falling over with him, silly fun stuff. Billy loved it when Dad spent time with him, because he was away so much.

After lunch, Mum was doing laundry, and Dad had gone upstairs to paint in the spare room. Normally Billy would have begged to help with the painting, and been given a brush and asked to paint the big important flat bits of the wall while Dad messed around with corners, edges and the high bits, but today he had other plans.

He deliberately didn't hear Dad asking if he wanted to help, grabbed his tiger-faced wind up torch with light-up eyes from his room, and headed out into the garden, winding away to charge it up.

Billy sprinted towards the shed, ears peeled for anyone approaching. '8-7-6, 6-7-8' he muttered as he entered the combination. Thunk! The lock opened. He hung it on the catch and pulled at the heavy door. For all its size and weight, it swung open effortlessly. Peering inside, the shed was pitch black so, glancing back at the house one more time to make sure the coast was clear, he turned on his torch and slipped inside.

As he entered, his permanently half tucked / untucked t-shirt caught on the door and jerked him back, making him crash loudly back into the closing door with a strangled cry. Freeing himself, and hoping his parents hadn't heard him yell, he allowed the door to swing closed on its own behind him as he gazed into an Aladdin's wonderland.

He hadn't needed his torch. There must have been some kind of clever movement activated light sensor somewhere, because lights came on automatically. The inside was not what Billy thought a garden shed should be like. Yes, there were some tools to one side; the lawn mower, saws, spades and what-not. But there was so much more.

On the other side to the tools was what looked like a space ship control panel. It was a 3 foot high silver console, with bright buttons, dials, several TV-like screens, and no less than 3 keyboards, only one of which had letters on it. The rest had funny symbols. Opposite the doors, upright and facing him, was an odd shaped cinema screen, about seven feet high and six feet wide, bordered in a weird ebony black frame and covered in wires and knobs and dials. Thick cables joined it to the space console.

Billy's jaw dropped in shock as he stood by the door and took it all in. As his eyes flitted over the peculiar equipment, he was drawn to the point on the screen frame, above where the wires snaked out, where there were two big buttons.

A green one, and a red one. The green one was flashing.

His legs shook in anticipation as he felt himself drawn irresistibly towards them. Billy could hear in his head his Mum's words, 'Honestly, Billy, I'm sure you are the nosiest boy in the world.' He knew he shouldn't, but Tommy would never forgive him if he didn't so there was no way he was not going to press that green button, and nothing on the planet was going to stop him.

He stepped forward, his trembling hand reaching out,

and fell flat on his face again with a second grunt of surprise as his right leg refused to go forward with the rest of him. Annoyingly, one of his always un-tied trailing laces was now trapped under the shed door. There was a reason why 'Billy! Laces!' were two of the most commonly heard words in his house.

Yanking his foot to free himself, his instinct of the moment to push the button left him, and he actually thought about his actions for a few seconds. He definitely should not touch anything. Obviously, this screen and console thing were the reasons Dad kept him out of the shed. It must be very important and Dad clearly had better reasons for not letting him in than simply keeping him away from the watering can.

No, Billy decided, he should not touch anything. He should admit to Dad that he'd got in the shed, and do the sensible thing and actually ask him about.

Having made what he considered to be a sensible and mature decision, it was a complete mystery to Billy as to why, with a shrug, a smile, and a tremble of excitement, he stepped forward anyway and pushed the green button in!

There were a series of electronic beeps, and things started to happen!