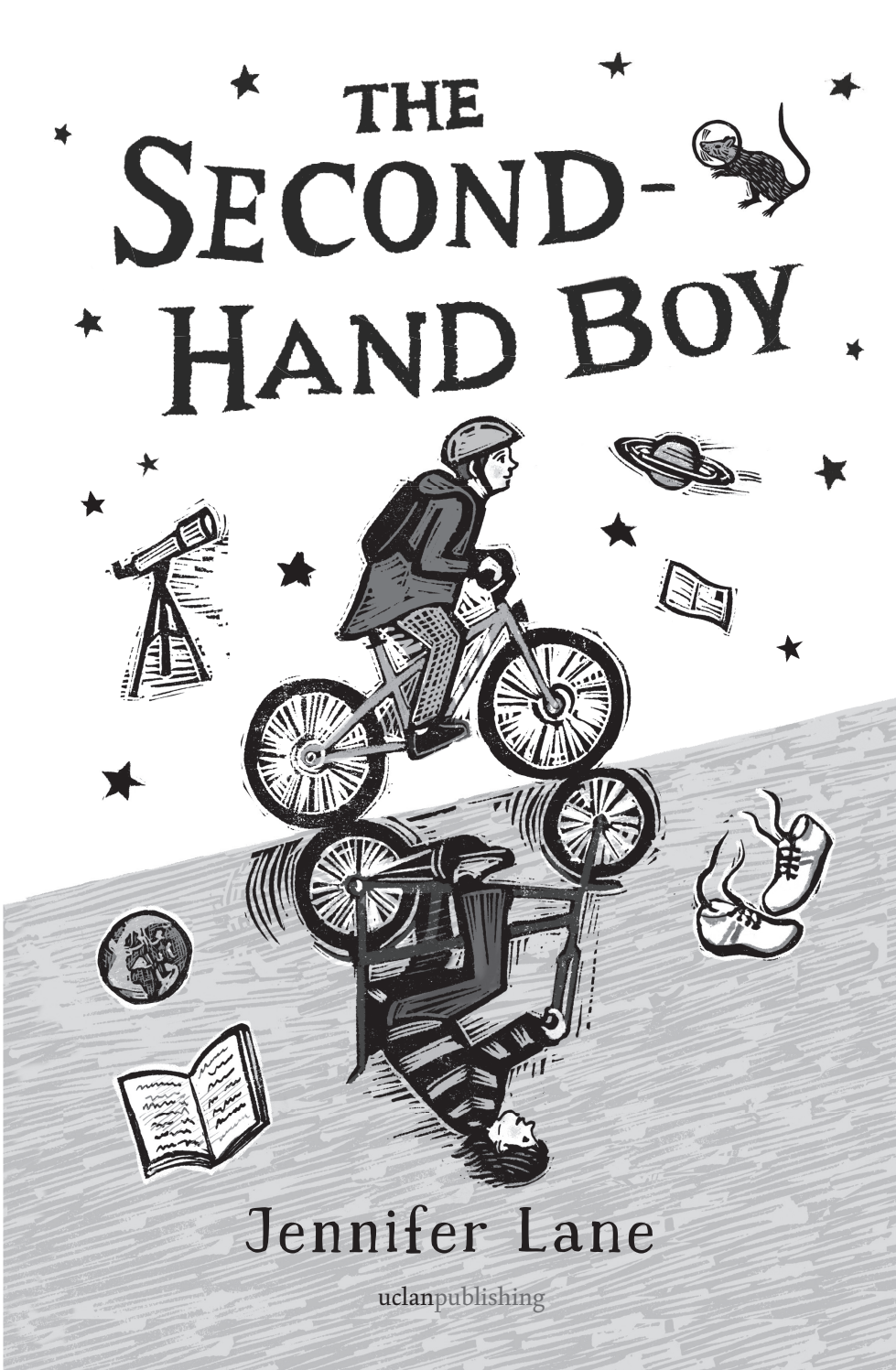
THE SECOND-HAND BOY



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For Elizabeth

"Oh, I've seen you often –
often and often –
when you never knew it."

Tom's Midnight Garden, Hatty Melbourne





CHAPTER ONE

Marty was leaving. He wasn't coming back. And I was doomed.

"So, this is it," he said.

"Yep," I nodded, fists by my sides.

He reached out his arms, all gangly and octopus-like, and I didn't really know what to do. I suppose I must have done something because, before I knew it, we were in a hug. Marty's back felt like a lizard under my sweaty palms – he was a bag of bones, the best at tag, he could dodge anyone. We'd once beaten a whole gang of Year Nines together: we were a team.

It lasted five seconds – one . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five. I counted them in my head, knowing Mum and Marty's mum were watching.

"So long, Space Rat," he said.

"Shove off, Reptile Freak."

Marty snorted and looked shifty like he always did when our mums heard our team names. They were our secret.

"Come on now, Martyn, love," said his mum. "We've got a *lot* of packing to do." She gave Mum a hug as well as a purple envelope with her swirly writing on it. I wondered what they had to say to each other in a letter that they couldn't say out loud to each other right now. Mrs Piercy got her coat from the back of the sofa. "Well, when I say we, I mean *you* and your amphibians."

Marty rolled his eyes and smirked at me, but he looked pale and his red hair stood up at weird angles. Even weirder than usual.

Marty's mum put her hand on his shoulder. "Come on now."

My best friend looked at me, then at my shoes like they were the most interesting things in the living room. More interesting than finding out how many moons there were in the Milky Way. More interesting than watching a rat snake climb a tree.

More interesting than doing wheelies in front of the chippie on a Friday night. More interesting than anything in the universe.

"Bye, then," said Marty.

"Bye," I muttered.

"I'll message soon, yeah?"

I nodded again. And then they were gone, bundling out of the front door and down the icy front flags into the dark evening. The door clanged behind them.

I stood in the living room, rigid. My arms were still tingling. I couldn't remember ever hugging Marty before, even though we'd been best mates for years and years. I think I'd patted his shoulder once when Sam, his first chameleon, had died. Maybe.

The silence closed in around me and I saw Mum nibbling her lip.

"How you doing, kid?"

I didn't answer, or rather, I couldn't answer. My voice seemed to have lost its way somewhere between my tongue and my teeth. "It'll be OK, Billy," she said with that look on her face, the one

everyone had been giving me all week. Sad and blubbery. She felt sorry for me, like all the teachers at school with tissues stuffed in every pocket, ready to whip one out at the first sign of me going over the edge. I wasn't going to cry or anything. I didn't do that. Mum might, but I certainly wasn't going to.

"I'm going to bed," I mumbled. I didn't want to be in the living room any more. Marty's mum always wore strong perfume under all her floaty scarves, and I could still smell it rising up from the sofa cushions.

I turned to go.

"Billy?"

"Yes, Mum?"

"I know school will be hard without Marty. I know he's been your best friend since Reception and it will take a little while to adjust."

I watched her tearing up, as if she'd lost *her* best friend too. I should have offered her the hanky in my pocket, but I'd used it to splat a fly that morning so I didn't do anything.

Mum continued. "But things will get better.

I'm sure there are lots of boys your age looking for a new friend."

I frowned. No there weren't. Had she completely lost touch with reality? This was *Year Eight* we were talking about.

Archie Fritz would be waiting for me. He'd shove my head in the rhododendron bush near the canteen when he saw I was on my own at break time. It would hurt too – all black and spiky and smelling like cat wee. Archie's victims were always off school the next day.

My heart sank. So, that's what school would be like without Marty. Archie Fritz and his gang would get me every day. I could hear them now:

"Oi, Billy-no-mates! Want to make friends with Burt? I think you'll like him." He'd flex his knuckles. Burt was the name he gave to his fist; the one that would be colliding with my face.

I suddenly felt as if my stomach was lined with ice. The January air seeped through the walls, inside my ratty old jumper, and froze all the turkey dippers inside me that I'd had for tea.

It felt too cold to be standing still like this.

"Billy?" Mum looked worried. She had a face that always looked worried, even when she was watching her soaps or brushing her teeth.

"It's OK, Mum. I'm going to bed," I repeated.

She let me go this time and I trudged upstairs to my room. It looked just the same as I'd left it, even though everything outside had changed.

My room was tiny and box-shaped, with orange walls. Bright orange – none of that wimpy tangerine stuff – so sometimes it felt like I was sleeping on Mars. OK, so Mars is red, but I thought it looked orange through Marty's telescope. I'd Blu-Tacked a big map of the solar system on my ceiling. Actually, Marty had; he was loads taller than me with long arms and legs.

I flopped down on my bed and looked at the planets above me, all held firmly in place. Marty's dad had taken us up to the big observatory in Leapingdon last summer. We'd looked through the giant telescopes and saw all the bright white dots, a thousand times bigger than just pinpricks in the sky.

Mercury, Jupiter, Vega, Polaris – I knew them all. Mrs Simmons had taught us a rude rhyme to remember all the planets that still made me giggle to think about. I liked the way she said it without batting an eyelid. Mum always wanted to know what it was but I knew if I actually told her I'd get sent to bed at six o'clock.

With a pang, I realised that I'd probably never get to use Marty's telescope again.

I looked around at my own stuff. My desk was a bit chipped because it had been my Auntie Pam's before I got it, and Auntie Pam was the sort of person who liked to leave dirty mugs everywhere. Mum had found my orange rug at the local car boot sale. There was definitely no telescope here. I didn't mind or anything, I knew we couldn't afford lots of new things. The only new thing I owned was my Mountain 3000: my green and silver bike. When I'd got it for my twelfth birthday last year, Marty and me had gone racing on the fields behind school. It was a great bike. It had been a great day.

Ow.

I was lying on something. I could feel it poking into my back. I reached underneath me and pulled it out from under the covers. It was a parcel.

A present!

It was wrapped in leftover Christmas paper, with fat Father Christmases riding red-nosed reindeer. Poor reindeer.

Marty must have sneaked upstairs and put it there before he'd left! I ripped into it, tearing through every single Santa hat.

The contents plopped on to my bed.

A book?

The cover was faded and the top corner was folded down as if it had belonged to someone else before me. The words *Tom's Midnight Garden* slanted across the front in large blue letters.

Confused, I opened the front cover.

Dear Billy,
Here's a little something to keep you busy.
It's a great book to get lost in.
Love, Mum x

I threw it down. It wasn't from Marty at all. Just a stupid tatty book from Mum. I already had loads of them. They all sat, yellow and dusty, on the shelf above my desk. Second-hand charity shop ones; someone's unwanted birthday present. I picked it up and re-read the message inside. I knew she was only trying to be nice, but I couldn't help feeling angry – it felt like Marty had left all over again. My stomach dropped another couple of degrees.

The cover of the book had a girl and a boy sitting in the grass in front of a big house. He was wearing pyjamas and she was in a funny-looking Victorian dress. This didn't look like my kind of thing at all.

Just above Mum's note, on the inside of the front cover, was inked another bit of writing, but scribbled out. I could still just about read the writing underneath it.

This book is property of James T.
Keep your dirty hands off it!
(Especially you, Bee!)

So it *had* belonged to someone else before me. Of course it had. James T. I put the book down again, like dropping a rotten sardine. I didn't have anything good.

I pushed myself up and turned off the light switch by the door. It was half-past seven. I turned to the wall and had a night of bad dreams while still in my jumper and jeans.

***

School was worse than I'd imagined.

In form, the seat next to me was glaringly empty. Mr Kipson kept looking at me as if I'd sprouted wings from my ears. How could he not even recognise me! I'd been in his form for nearly two years. Everyone was so used to seeing me and Marty together that they'd never noticed just me before. I tried to pretend I'd gone blurry around the edges, like someone had taken a giant rubber and scrubbed at my nose and my arms and my legs until I was just a fuzzy mark on the page.

But Archie Fritz noticed me straight away.

"All right there, Willy?" He was tall, taller than

anyone else in our year, and looked like an Olympic runner. I'd heard his dad was a gym instructor and taught Archie how to lift weights but shouted at him if he didn't lift the heaviest ones.

"Your friend not here to play today?"

I sank down in my chair.

Everyone knew Marty had left. They'd told everybody in assembly and Marty had stood on his chair and given us all a military salute.

Archie laughed in the quiet classroom, and so did his gang: Cormack, Phil and Doddy. The sound made my stomach shrink.

"Now, now, Archie," said Mr Kipson, over his glasses. He was a small, wispy man who couldn't knot his tie properly. "We've got to take Billy under our wing, yes? Martyn Piercy has had to go away travelling with his parents, and I'm sure we're all going to support Billy whilst Martyn's overseas. Right, class?"

He smiled around the room, but his words were met with dull silence. Someone snorted.

I cringed and slipped even further down in my

seat. Archie Fritz turned to me and grinned like a hungry cheetah.

***

At break, I hid in the loos and read all the graffiti. Turns out loads of people liked to draw willies on the wall.

I knew I should be out there. Maybe I could hang round with Jake Brinnley; he had a scar on his arm that he could wiggle to make it look like a snake. That was his one trick. Don't think he was much for conversation though.

I put the lid down on the loo and sat with my feet up so no one could look under the door and see some loser squatting there. Archie wouldn't find me that way and I hoped I wouldn't smell like wee all day.

I quietly unzipped my rucksack and rooted around for some leftover homework. I hadn't done my maths: I just couldn't do it – we were redoing long division in class (or in my case, watching two pigeons squabble over a soggy butty out the window) and I didn't get it at all. I'd stared again

and again at the page but the sums looked all wiggly and didn't make any sense. My exercise book was going to be full of red crosses – I could see it now. I put the book back inside my bag but my fingers met something else. I pulled it out.

It was *Tom's Midnight Garden*. That silly book from Mum. I rolled my eyes. She'd probably slipped it in there that morning when I was having my toast. I didn't have anything else to do and I didn't have any messages from Marty so, scowling, I flipped to page one. But for some reason, the page didn't look right.

I blinked down at it. Under the chapter title, penned in bright green biro, were the words:

This is a good book. It might look sissy from the front cover, but I think you should read it.

I grinned. It looked like this James had written more than just his name inside the book.

I started to read. It was quite good. The book was all about a guy called Tom leaving home for the

summer because his brother had measles. I thought of Marty leaving but tried to shrug it off. Marty was probably having the time of his life travelling the world with his mum and dad. France, Canada, New Zealand – everywhere, probably. He'd be back to visit soon though; that's what we'd planned out. I wasn't going to cry or anything.

Tom was crying in the book. In the margin was scrawled:

If my ratbag sister had measles I'd be jumping for joy.

James had been busy with his green pen again and was giving me a running commentary. I snorted. I quite liked James. I wondered how long ago he'd owned the book and wrote all this stuff inside. The green ink was quite faded by now.

The bell rang for the end of break and I carefully put the book back in my bag.

In French, Madame Honoré had a cold and was wrapped up in a scarf. All I could see of her were her dark eyes and her puffball of hair that bobbed up

and down when she wrote on the board.

With Marty gone, she sat me next to Lindsay Thorpe.

Lindsay Thorpe didn't talk to anyone. Her dad drove her to school in his Mercedes and she was top of the year in every subject, even Maths. I don't know how she did it. It was probably why she didn't have many friends.

She definitely wouldn't talk to me, not even when we had to practise our French verbs together. She wrote them all down in her book with her purple gel pen but didn't say anything out loud.

"Lindsay, shouldn't we be . . .?"

She didn't say anything, just turned the page in her textbook and started doing our homework.

Madame Honoré looked up. "Not saying anything, *mon petit*, Billy? *Ah, mais non: il faut parler!*" She sneezed and went back to her marking.

I didn't know what she was saying but I pretended to speak to Lindsay Thorpe, even if she didn't look at me once.

***

Every January, when it snowed, Marty and I would go straight up to Dunbald Hill behind the farm after school and have The Great Rolling Race. First one to the bottom got a Snickers. Last one to the bottom had to eat dodgy snow. Best of three.

It was the ultimate tradition. The village was the highest one up for miles around so we always had snow no matter what.

I passed Dunbald Hill and cut through the fancy part of the village on the way home. All the houses here looked like someone had just polished the windows and shined the door knockers earlier that day – everyone must own a team of invisible butlers. They were the sort of streets that footballers lived on, or rich old great-aunties who gave you too many sweets and slipped a crisp ten pound note in your palm just before you left. Not that any of my aunties were like that. I only had the one, great-auntie Pam, and she tended to smell of Bovril. Her idea of a treat was taking you to play bingo on a Friday night.

These were old houses, Victorian or Edwardian, or something-ian, but done up nicely with neat little

hedgerows and avenues of trees. In the summer it would be all leafy here, and all the flowers would be spilling out in streamers over the gates. I always ambled a little slower down these streets.

The icy cobbles made it hard to walk and I fell on my bum a couple of times, but at least I knew Archie Fritz wasn't going to get me round here – he hung out on Marty's street. Well, Marty's *old* street.

Our estate was on the opposite side of the village: all peeling woodwork, chipped roof tiles and the odd discarded gnome. Mum said she was going to buy some blue paint for our front door and a shiny new letterbox one day. But then again, she also said she saw ghosts and sometimes flicked the light switch on and off three times before bed.

I turned into Cooper Street, the big, long road before you get to my house. You've got to be careful near mine. People hang around near the shops, and I saw a girl nicking off with two cans of Pepsi and a kebab once. I always kept tight hold of my rucksack when I was going up our street.

I opened the front door and gagged.

The smell of disinfectant knocked me sideways. It filled our little middle terrace, huffing down the stairs and along the chipped skirting boards. Mum did this stuff all the time. She'd clean the house from top to bottom – not once, not twice, but three times. Even the bit behind the wardrobe where no one ever looked. Sometimes I'd interrupt her and she'd start crying, saying she'd have to start all over again now.

With a hesitant hand, I pushed open the lounge door. Mum was on the sofa, eyes closed.

I froze.

She must have been having one of her Days. There was half a packet of biscuits open on the floor and reruns of her soaps played quietly on the TV, casting a fuzzy light on to our faces. There were crumbs scattered all over her, like a mini asteroid belt.

"Hi," I said.

She jumped, her eyes flaring open.

"Billy!" She quickly smoothed her blanket out.

"You OK?"

"Me? Oh yes, yes. I'm all right." Her straight

brown hair was all stuck up on one side. The neat line of freckles across her nose had got mixed up with sugar crumbs. She loved biscuits – Party Rings the best.

I never knew what to say on her Days. I wanted to make out that everything was normal but Marty's mum had never had Days, even if she did try to feed us lentils for every meal and did handstands in the bathroom. She was a bit weird but in a different way.

Mum wasn't like the other mums.

I dumped my bag by the settee. "What's for tea, Mum?"

"Hm?"

"We having anything for tea?"

Her eyes went out of focus. "Oh! Oh, Billy, I'm sorry. I've not been shopping again." Two big tears welled up in the corners of her eyes, right at the top of her nose, so I quickly sat down and handed her a biscuit.

"S'OK, Mum, honest!" I gabbled. "You want me to nip round to the Chinese later?"

She let the words settle then looked at me like

I'd said I'd cook a three-course roast. "Would you, Billy? That'd be *amazing*."

I had spring rolls and special fried rice. Jun Wok's was the best. If I was at Marty's, I would have had duck too but there was only ten pounds and twenty-one pee in Mum's purse.

"Let me know when you hear from Marty," she said, carefully slicing an egg roll into three equal bits.

"He's only been gone a day, Mum." It felt like much longer.

"Yes, I know, but I'm sure he'll write as soon as he can. You did say you'd write letters, didn't you?"

I nodded. Marty's mum didn't believe in the internet – she said it gave everyone headaches and caused earthquakes. I wanted to text Marty but, like I said, it had only been a day. Was it too soon to message?

There were three beats of quiet.

"How was school? Did you talk to anybody new?" She was absorbed by her plate. She'd put all the rice on one side so that it took up exactly half the plate and didn't touch her neat egg roll bits. Mum stared at her little tub of soy sauce like it was giving her a surprise serenade. I sought the right words to use in my head.

"Mmm," I mumbled. "Yeah, loads of people." But I knew she wasn't listening any more, so I stopped talking.

I squidged my rice up into a solid block and squashed it with the back of my fork. That's probably what Archie Fritz would do to me tomorrow. Suddenly, I didn't feel that hungry.