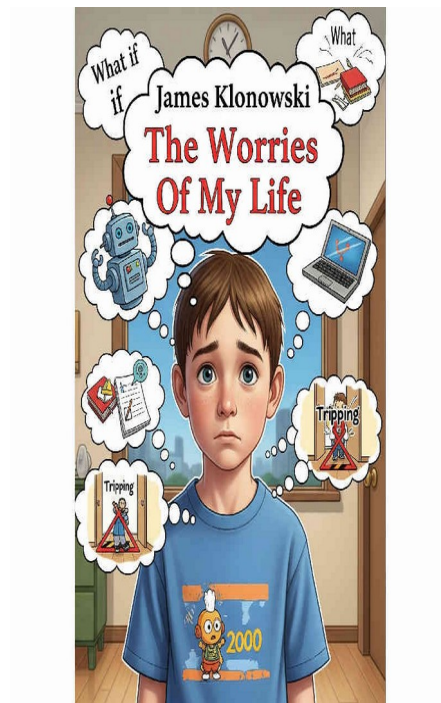




The Worries Of My Life

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Prologue

Hello! My name is Conner Sampson, and I'm ten years old. Now, before you even open your mouth to say it – no, I am not a worrier. Some people, especially Mum, like to give my head a little pat and sigh, "Oh, Conner, always thinking too much." But honestly? She's completely wrong. I don't worry. I simply prepare. There's a huge difference, you see. Worrying is just sitting around fretting, like when you're waiting for your teeth to fall out after eating too many sweets. Preparing is when you actually do something about it. And my top-secret weapon for being super-prepared? My amazing "What If" notebook.

This isn't just any old notebook, oh no. This is a special, leather-bound, slightly-scuffed-at-the-edges companion. It's stuffed full of the most important information anyone could ever need: every single disaster scenario I can think of, and – even better – my brilliant solutions to them all! I carry it with me everywhere, tucked safely into my backpack, right next to my emergency whistle and my spare shoelaces. The moment a new "what if" pops into my head, out it comes, and down it goes. That's how I stay on top of things. It's called being proactive, which is a very grown-up word for being super-organised.

The year is 1999, and everyone keeps saying it's a very important year. All the grown-ups are muttering on and on about something called the Millennium Bug. Apparently, when the clock goes from 1999 to 2000, all the world's computers are going to go completely bonkers. Planes might fall out of the sky, cash machines will stop spitting out money, and fridges could even refuse to make ice! It sounds like proper chaos. While everyone else is flapping around like headless chickens, me? I'm convinced I'll find a solution. I've already filled three whole pages in my notebook with "Operation: Bug Squish," involving emergency generators and a very large hammer. I'm still figuring out the tiny details, but I'm completely confident.

Now, let me introduce you to the rest of the Sampson clan. They're excellent sources of "what if" scenarios, even if they don't even realise it.

First up, there's Mum. She's always got a headache. Seriously, always. She walks around with this little crinkly frown stuck between her eyebrows, rubbing her temples like she's trying to rub away a permanent smudge. She says it's from "stress," which I'm pretty sure is just a grown-up way of saying she worries too much and doesn't have a "What If" notebook. Her biggest problem, though, is her pills. She's always popping them – little white ones, little blue ones.

She calls them her "migraine tablets," but I've done my research. I once saw a documentary about people who get a bit too fond of pills. So, I've started hiding them. Just a few at a time, mind you, tucked into the empty biscuit tin (obviously!) or under the sofa cushions. It's for her own good. If she can't find them, she can't take too many. It's a tricky "what if" – What if Mum accidentally overdoses? – but my solution is absolutely foolproof.

Then there's Dad. He mostly just grunts. And he drinks a lot of "adults' pop," which is what he calls

his cider. It's always fizzy and gold, and it makes him smell funny, like old apples and something else I can't quite describe. He's almost always in a mood, either a grump-mood or a loud-mood. He's a walking hazard, honestly. Only last week, he nearly backed the rubbish bin into next-door's prize-winning collection of Petulas. My "What If" notebook has a whole section just for "Dad-Related Incidents," including: What if Dad walks into a lamppost? (Solution: Have a bandage on hand) and What if Dad forgets my birthday? (Solution: Leave subtle clues, like drawing a gigantic cake on the calendar).

My older brother is Steven. He's fourteen, which means he thinks he knows absolutely everything, but mostly he just knows about science fiction and really gross stuff. He smells a bit like unwashed socks and spends all his time in his room, buried under piles of comic books and empty crisp packets. He's basically a pig. We have absolutely nothing in common. He thinks my "What If" notebook is "nerdy," which is pretty rich coming from a boy who genuinely believes aliens are going to land in our garden. My "What If" for him is usually: What if Steven's room becomes a biohazard? (Solution: Strategic deployment of Mum's strongest air freshener and a hazmat suit).

And finally, there's Lucy. She's twelve, and she's what Mum calls "highly strung." I call her "obsessed with herself." She spends hours staring at herself in the mirror, practising different ways to smile or frown. She talks on the phone for so long that the phone actually gets hot, and she only ever wants to watch pop music videos. Her biggest "what if" contributor is usually to do with her hair. What if Lucy's hair turns green? (Solution: Stock up on emergency hair dye, just in case).

My "What If" notebook has saved the day more times than I can even count. Like that time:

* What if Steven swaps my plain bran flakes for sugary cereal? (Solution: Get an emergency appointment at the dentist and scrub my teeth clean!)

* What if the school bus breaks down in the middle of a zombie apocalypse? (Solution: Always carry a compass and a small bag of emergency biscuits. Not that there's been a zombie apocalypse yet, but you can never be too prepared!)

* What if Dad accidentally glues his hand to the remote control again? (Solution: Keep a bottle of nail polish remover handy. It actually happened twice last year. The nail polish remover worked a treat!)

* What if Lucy tries to steal my pocket money for her glitter collection? (Solution: Hide money in plain sight inside an old maths textbook. She'd never look in there!)

* What if Mum forgets to buy milk for my morning cereal? (Solution: Have a backup box of UHT milk hidden behind the tins in the pantry. Crucial for cereal emergencies!)

So, you see? I'm not a worrier. I'm a planner. I'm an analyst. I'm the family's very own resident disaster manager.

But lately, there's been a new "what if" that's bigger than all the others, one that my clever solutions haven't quite caught up with. It all started because of Steven. He was watching one of his creepy documentaries, and because I was trying to avoid Dad's grumpy mood and Lucy's endless phone calls, I ended up watching it with him.

It was about a family that died in a house fire. It showed the charred, black, crumbly remains of the house, and spoke in hushed, scary voices about how quickly it all happened. The smoke, the flames, the terrible crackling sounds... It looked absolutely terrifying. And it got stuck in my head.

Now, it's all I can think about, night and day. What if our house catches fire? What if we're all asleep? What if the smoke alarm runs out of batteries? My worry-meter isn't just buzzing; it's practically screaming! It's the biggest, scariest "what if" I've ever faced, and my notebook, usually brimming with clever plans, feels a bit empty on this one.

I need a solution. A foolproof, absolutely perfect plan to save my entire family from a house fire. And I need it fast. Because if I can't find one, then all my other preparations, all my careful planning for Millennium Bugs and zombie apocalypses, won't mean a thing. This is the big one. This is my most important mission yet.

Chapter One

The summer of 1999 stretched out before me like a long, shimmering road, and honestly, it felt less like an invitation and more like a dare. Everyone around me kept chirping about how it was going to be "the best summer ever," but I wasn't so sure. I mean, the world hadn't blown up like some people had predicted, not yet anyway, but that didn't mean it was out of the woods.

The sun outside was blazing, practically daring me to look at it, and it made a nervous flutter start in my stomach. What if it got too hot? I'd heard somewhere, maybe on a documentary or a science show, that stars could explode when they got too old. And the sun, well, the sun was definitely a star, right? I kept picturing it in my head, getting bigger and bigger, radiating more heat, until suddenly, BAM! No more world, just a cosmic dust cloud. I even asked Mum if we could get blackout curtains, just as a precaution, but she just laughed, patted my head, and said, "Don't be silly, love, it's summer! We want the sunshine." Her casual dismissal didn't make the worry go away; it just made me feel even more alone with my exploding-star fears.

And then there was Mum. Today, she had a headache, a really bad one by the looks of it. She kept pressing her fingers against her temples, sighing deeply, and her usual cheerful hum was replaced by a low groan. I saw a show once, a medical drama, where someone had a headache, and it turned out to be a brain tumour. A brain tumour! The words echoed in my mind like a terrifying whisper. I couldn't stop looking at her, scrutinising every movement. Was she walking weird? Was her speech a little slurred? She seemed okay, just tired, but my imagination was running wild. I kept picturing those doctors on TV, their faces grim, their voices hushed, delivering bad news. What if Mum needed a big, scary operation? What if she... What if she didn't get better? The thought sent a cold shiver down my spine, a feeling far worse than any exploding sun. I tried to push the thoughts away, but they clung to me like burrs, prickly and insistent.

All my "friends" (they're actually just neighbours who resent me because I'm homeschooled, and they're not), oblivious to the impending cosmic doom and potential medical emergencies, were deep in their own summer bubble. They were trading Pokémon cards, debating the merits of Charizard versus Blastoise, and endlessly replaying that new Britney Spears song, "Oops!... I Did It Again," on their boomboxes. They were planning sleepovers filled with pizza and scary movies, and their biggest concern was probably whether the swimming pool would be too crowded. But I just couldn't focus on any of that.

Every time I heard the distant, cheerful jingle of the ice cream truck, instead of thinking about a double scoop of chocolate ripple, I wondered if the engine was going to seize up right there in the middle of the street. When a plane roared overhead, instead of marvelling at its journey, I imagined it spiralling out of control and crashing right into our house, right into my bedroom. Even our trusty dial-up internet, with its familiar, comforting screech-bloop-bzzzz sound, made me anxious. What if it just... broke? What if we couldn't get online to look up important information, or to check if the world was still there?

And then there was the big one: the Y2K bug. Everyone said it was fine, that it was sorted, that computers wouldn't all spontaneously combust on January 1st, 2000. But what if they were wrong?

What if it was just waiting, lurking in the digital shadows, ready to attack our computer and bring down civilization as we knew it? It was all just... a lot. A whole overwhelming, suffocating lot. And it was only July. I had a whole month and a half of this anxious summer left. Would I even make it to the new millennium?

What If.... Part One

If you ask me, I've got more concerns buzzing around my brain than most kids. Forget the usual stuff, like dreaded pop quizzes or whether my super-important Game Boy batteries will give up the ghost right in the middle of a level. Oh no, my worries are much, much bigger. We're talking about things like stars exploding, or the whole entire internet just vanishing into thin air! Imagine that!

But here's the thing about me: I don't just sit and stew. If I did, well, I honestly don't know where we'd all be. When a really massive worry, one of those ones that feels like it's got sharp little claws digging right into your brain, pops up, I do something about it. I grab my trusty spiral-bound notebook – the one with the slightly chewed cover – and I write it down. And right next to that worry? My brilliant solution, all carefully worked out. I call them my "What If Moments." And this one... well, this was a biggie.

What If the Sun Grew Too Big?

July had been a total scorcher, one of those never-ending heatwaves where even looking out the window felt like you were staring into an oven. It felt like the sun itself was trying to cook our little town of Willow Creek. My worries about it getting too hot, about it puffing up like a giant, fiery balloon, had been a teeny, tiny whisper in the back of my mind for ages. But today? Today that whisper turned into a full-blown roar.

It started ever so subtly. The air, already thick and shimmery, began to vibrate with a really weird hum. Then, a strange, sickly orange glow began to seep into the sky, swallowing up the usual cheerful blue. Mum, who'd been groaning with a headache all morning, mumbled something about the glare and yanked the curtains shut. But it was no good. The light, hot and bossy, stabbed right through the fabric, splashing an eerie, pulsing pattern all over our living room walls.

"It's just a heatwave, love," Mum grumbled, her voice all muffled because she had her face squashed into a pillow.

But I knew. I just knew, deep down in my gut, that this wasn't just any heatwave. I tiptoed to the window, peeking through a tiny gap in the curtains. The sun, usually a friendly, faraway disc, now filled an alarming chunk of the sky. It was closer. So much closer. And a terrifying, wobbly crown of fire pulsed all around its edges. Heat poured through the glass, making my skin prickle and my eyes water. This wasn't just a heatwave anymore; this was my biggest fear, blazing right to life.

Panic, cold and sharp like a splinter, grabbed hold of me. "Mum! The sun! It's... it's growing!" I shrieked.

She groaned again, waving a floppy hand at me. "Don't be silly, Connor. It's just your imagination running wild."

But it wasn't! Outside, I could hear shouts and gasps. The cheerful ding-dong of the ice cream truck, which usually made me happy even if I was too worried to ask for money, was now a frantic, off-key

clang as it sped past, its tyres squealing like a banshee. I saw Mrs. Gable, who was usually so neat she probably ironed her socks, running down the street in her pyjamas, her hair a wild, frizzy mess, dragging a dripping garden hose behind her. People were pointing, their faces stretched tight with pure terror, at the enormous, terrifying orange blob in the sky.

The heat got even worse, turning the air into a suffocating, sticky blanket. Our house groaned and creaked, the wooden beams groaning under the massive warmth. Our trusty dial-up modem, which usually had such comforting chirps and whistles, let out a tortured, high-pitched screech before falling totally silent. No internet. No way to look up "exploding sun." Not that I needed to. It was happening.

Just as I felt a horrible wave of despair washing over me, a strange glint caught my eye. It was coming from the old, dusty attic window. I remembered Mum showing me something up there a few weeks ago – an old, tarnished brass telescope that belonged to my Great-Grandpa Alistair. Mum said he was an amateur astronomer, whatever that means. "He believed in magic, your great-grandpa did," she'd said with a soft smile. "Said the stars held secrets."

A crazy idea, born out of pure, frantic desperation, sparked in my mind. What if? What if there was something in that telescope?

"I'm going to the attic!" I yelled, scrambling up the stairs, taking two at a time.

"Connor, no! It's too hot!" Mum's voice sounded weak, but I didn't care. I was driven by a really primal need to do something.

The attic was like an inferno, a baking oven, but I barely even noticed. I fumbled through cobweb-draped boxes, my hands brushing against forgotten treasures, until my fingers finally closed around the cool, smooth brass of the telescope. It was heavier than I expected, and as I pulled it out, a faint, almost invisible glow seemed to come from its lens.

I hauled the telescope to the window, the glass already too hot to touch. Squinting through the eyepiece, I saw the horrifying spectacle magnified: the sun, a pulsating, monstrous thing, its fiery tendrils reaching out like grasping claws. But then, something else appeared in the lens – not on the sun itself, but around it. Tiny, shimmering specks, like microscopic bits of dust, began to swirl. As I focused, they changed, becoming intricate, almost invisible patterns, glowing with a soft, magical light.

And then, I heard it. Not with my ears, not like a normal sound, but right inside my mind. A whisper, ancient and deep, like the creak of old wood and the sigh of distant winds.

"The sun is not a thing to fear, young one. It is merely... unbalanced. A song has been forgotten. A rhythm lost."

I stared, totally mesmerized. What song? What rhythm?

As if to answer, the telescope vibrated in my hands, and a single, pure note, like a tuning fork being struck, hummed from its brass casing. It vibrated deep inside me, echoing the patterns I saw in the lens. Instinctively, without even understanding why, I began to hum along, matching the note, then changing it slightly, feeling for a connection to the swirling lights. I thought of the soothing hum Mum sometimes made when she was comforting me, the comfortable rhythm of her walking, the gentle beat of her heart. I focused on those familiar, calming sounds.

Slowly, impossibly, the shimmering specks around the sun began to come together, drawing closer, forming faint, shimmering lines. The more I hummed, the more the patterns shifted, becoming more defined, like an intricate, luminous web. I imagined the sun, a wild, roaring beast, being calmed by a gentle lullaby. I poured all my anxious energy, all my fear, into that imagined song, guiding the light patterns with the subtle shifts in my hum.

Outside, the frantic shouts had lessened, replaced by a stunned, hushed silence. The intense heat began to fade, little by little. I pressed my eye to the telescope, my hum a steady, unwavering drone. The monstrous orange glow in the sky softened, then slowly, miraculously, began to shrink. The fiery tendrils pulled back, shrinking back into the sun's core.

Finally, after what felt like an absolute eternity, the sun returned to its familiar, friendly golden disc, still bright, still warm, but no longer a terrifying, expanding monster. The sky, though still a bit hazy, got a hint of its blue back.

I collapsed against the dusty attic floor, the telescope clattering beside me. My throat was so dry and scratchy, and my whole body trembled, not from fear anymore, but from the immense relief that flooded through me.

I stumbled downstairs, feeling utterly drained, like all my energy had been sucked right out of me. Mum was still on the sofa, slowly sitting up, rubbing her temples. "What was all that commotion?" she mumbled, blinking against the now-gentle sunlight filtering through the curtains. She paused, then frowned. "My headache... it's gone."

I just nodded, unable to speak a single word. I looked outside. People were cautiously coming out of their homes, blinking in the softened light, looking up at the sky with a mixture of bewilderment and relief. The ice cream truck, now moving slowly and steadily, made a cheerful, in-tune jingle as it passed.

No one would believe me, of course. They'd probably say it was just a strange heat phenomenon, a trick of the light. But I knew. I, Connor, the worrier, the one who always imagined the worst, had somehow, with an ancient telescope and a whispered song, saved the day.

And for the first time all summer, the idea of an exploding sun, or anything else, didn't feel quite so overwhelming.

Chapter Two

My pencil was practically sizzling, scribbling so fast in my Mead notebook that the paper felt hot. My knee bounced up and down under my duvet, a nervous thrum-thrum-thrum that echoed the super-speedy beat of my heart. Outside my bedroom door, I could hear Mum humming some annoying tune from the radio, probably doing the washing up, totally oblivious to the giant, world-ending doom I was carefully, meticulously writing down.

My door, though? Completely barricaded. I'd wedged my trusty, if slightly wobbly, desk chair right under the doorknob. No way was anyone getting in here without a proper battering ram, and even then, I wasn't entirely sure. Not that I was expecting a battering ram, but you could never, ever be too careful. Especially not today. Every tiny creak the house made, every distant siren wail, felt like a warning, a spooky clue to the chaos I was getting ready for.

Even though it was the middle of July, and ages away until New Year's Day, all I could keep thinking about was the Millennium Bug. Y2K, the grown-ups called it, all posh and important. Adults kept saying it was nothing, just a silly computer glitch, like a tiny hiccup in the world's giant brain. But what if it wasn't? What if it was a huge, terrifying monster lurking inside all the computers, just waiting for the clock to strike midnight on January 1st, 2000? What if all the clocks stopped, freezing time itself? What if the electricity went out and never, ever came back on, plunging us into eternal darkness? What if the whole world just... froze? Like a giant, broken video game. The thought sent shivers right down my spine, even though it was a boiling hot summer day.

My list of worries was getting longer and longer, filling up page after page in my trusty notebook. I had to be prepared. Someone had to be! And since everyone else seemed to be too busy talking about Pokémon and Britney Spears, it looked like it was all up to me, Conner Sampson.

I pressed my pencil harder, adding another item to my never-ending list of potential catastrophes.

** Perhaps I should learn how to build a fire without matches.*

** And what about canned goods? How many tins of spaghetti hoops would we need to survive a global blackout?*

These were the really important questions.

My bedroom wasn't really a room, not if you asked me. It was more like a box. A really, really small box, squashed into the corner of our council house. I mean, I could practically touch both walls if I stretched my arms out wide enough, which was a worry in itself. What if the walls decided to squeeze in even tighter, trapping me like a sardine? My bed, a tiny single, took up most of the space, leaving just enough room for my little, flickering TV. It was one of those old, chunky ones, not like the flat screens they have in the future. I sometimes worried about replacing it.

What if the new TVs needed a special kind of electricity that wouldn't work after Y2K?

In the very corner, right by where my feet dangled off the bed, was a small bookcase. It was mostly full of Goosebumps books (perfect for practising my survival skills against fictional monsters) and a few old Beano annuals. But what really made the room mine, besides all my worries, were the posters. Oh, the posters! My walls were completely plastered with them, turning my tiny box-room into a shrine to my heroes. There was The Rock, doing that eyebrow raise that always made me giggle, even when I was fretting about something as serious as the end of the world.

Then there was Triple H, looking all serious and intense, which sometimes made me worry about him winning too much and running out of opponents. And, of course, Stone Cold Steve Austin, with his bald head and those scowling eyes. He was my favourite, mostly because he seemed like he never worried about anything, ever. It was 1999, and everyone I knew was obsessed with wrestling. I just hoped the posters wouldn't peel off the walls in the middle of the night. That would be a whole new thing to worry about, a tiny catastrophe in my otherwise perfectly arranged (and worried-over) world.

I was just about to start my top-secret mission (which involved drawing a new wrestling ring layout, just in case I ever got to design one for real, perhaps for the new post-Y2K wrestling federation) when there was a knock on the door. It wasn't just any knock, either. It was the knock.

The one that always came right when I was deep in thought, usually about something important, like whether Triple H secretly practised his entrance music in the shower, or if Stone Cold truly drank that much beer.

"Honey, are you coming out any time soon?" That was Mum's voice, muffled through the door. It sounded a bit... tired. Which meant I was probably about to be asked to do something, something that would interrupt my crucial worry-documenting. My stomach did a little flip.

What if she wanted me to clean my room? The thought of moving all my wrestling action figures, meticulously arranged in their various factions, sent a shiver down my spine. What if they got mixed up? The horror! My meticulously planned battles would be ruined!

"I'm busy!" I called back, trying to sound really, really busy. Like I was defusing a bomb or something equally important, which, in my mind, I pretty much was. My drawing hand paused mid-ring rope.

There was a little sigh from outside. "Alright," she said, her voice a bit closer now, like she'd leaned against the door. "But I would like to know where you've hidden my headache pills? Mummy could do with them."

My eyes widened. Headache pills? Hidden? Oh no. My mind started racing, trying to access the deepest corners of my memory. Had I accidentally kicked them under my bed when I was doing my Stone Cold Stunner practice, practising my finishing move on an imaginary opponent? Had they somehow magically transported themselves into my sock drawer, perhaps seeking refuge amongst the mismatched socks? I mean, it was possible. Things had a way of disappearing in my room, usually right when you needed them most.

And a worried Mum usually meant a Mum who was going to ask more questions. A lot more questions. Questions I probably didn't have answers to.

I just stared at my drawing, the half-finished wrestling ring suddenly looking like a giant trap, a

symbol of my impending doom. Headache pills. Hidden. My brain went into overdrive. Had I? Had I really hidden them? I mean, I wouldn't mean to, but sometimes things just... vanished. Especially when I was trying to make sure everything was in the right place, which usually meant I accidentally put them in the wrong place. Or a different wrong place. A very wrong, unfindable place.

A familiar knot started to tighten in my stomach. This was it. This was how it always started. A small worry, then a bigger one, and then a whole tsunami of them, crashing over me with relentless force. What if Mum's headache got worse? What if she needed those pills for something super important, like stopping her head from exploding (which was a genuine worry of mine, even though Dad always laughed when I said it)? What if she thought I'd hidden them on purpose to be annoying? Oh, the horror! The injustice!

My hand, which moments ago had been carefully drawing turnbuckles, was now scrabbling for my notebook. I had to write this down. I had a special notebook just for my worries, neatly organised into categories: "Immediate Concerns," "Things to Worry About Later," and "Things I Probably Don't Need to Worry About But Still Do." This definitely fell into the "Immediate Concerns" category, possibly even a sub-category of "Catastrophe Averted if Found Quickly."

My pen flew across the page.

* Mum's headache pills – location unknown.

* Possible consequences: Mum unhappy, Mum sick, I get blamed, Mum can't watch SmackDown with me later.

* Check under bed.

* Check in the sock drawer.

* Check behind the bookcase.

* Check under the pile of Beano annuals.

I ripped that sheet off, practically tearing it in my haste. It wasn't enough. There were too many variables, too many unknowns. What if they weren't in any of those places? What if they'd been abducted by aliens, perhaps needing them for an intergalactic headache? (Okay, probably not, but my brain liked to explore all options, even the extraterrestrial ones).

I grabbed a fresh piece of paper, my brow furrowed so hard it probably looked like a wrinkled map of all my worries. My pen scratched wildly.

New worry: What if I lose ALL the headache pills in the world? What if the pharmacy runs out because of some Y2K-related supply chain issue? What if everyone gets a headache at the same time, and there are no pills left?

This was going to be a long day, a very, very long day.

I finally stopped scribbling, my hand aching. I looked down at the pages, covered in my frantic, messy handwriting. Reading all those worries, one after the other, just made the knot in my stomach

twist even tighter. It was like I'd written down a recipe for a really bad day, with extra anxiety sauce. I took a deep, shaky breath, but it didn't help much; it just seemed to stir the worries around in my head even more.

Then came a loud, thumping knock on the door, followed by a sort of heavy shove, like someone was trying to break it down. My heart jumped into my throat.

"Conner, if you don't open this door I'm gonna take my belt off!" It was Dad's voice, all slurred and thick. He always sounded like that after he'd been out, like his words were wrestling with each other before they came out. He let out a loud hiccup, then mumbled, "Little weirdo."

I didn't move. I didn't even look up. I just kept my eyes glued to my worry-filled pages. It was like he wasn't even there, just a noisy background hum to the real problems in my head – like Mum's missing headache pills and the ever-present threat of universal headaches. My hand found my pen again, and I started writing, adding another, smaller worry to the growing list:

Dad's belt – potential weapon? Or just a loud threat?

There was another knock, still loud, but a bit less shove-y this time, almost like Dad was losing steam. I ignored that one too. My pen scratched against the paper, trying to make sense of the chaos in my brain, trying to categorise and contain the endless flow of "what ifs."

I was just about to add "What if Dad's belt actually breaks?" to my list (because that seemed like a pretty solid worry, even if he was just joking, you never knew with belts), when a new voice cut through the muffled banging and mumbling from outside.

"Conner!" It was Lucy, her voice sharp and clear, even through the door. "Who Wants To Be A Millionaire is starting! You coming down?"

Who Wants To Be A Millionaire! My head snapped up, my eyes wide. Fridays were the best for that show. Chris Tarrant, with his booming voice and perfectly timed pauses; the tense music that made your heart pound as if you were in the hot seat yourself; the way people's faces looked when they got a really hard question about, like, Roman emperors or something obscure about medieval history. It was one of the few things that could sometimes pull me away from my worries, at least for an hour. It was a temporary escape, a blissful hour of not worrying about exploding suns or missing headache pills.

"I'm almost done!" I yelled back, my voice cracking a little, already scrambling to finish my final notes. I knew "almost done" usually meant "I need at least another twenty minutes to write down all the things that are making my brain feel like a fizzing lemonade bottle." But Millionaire... that was different. That was important. That was non-negotiable.

Okay, Millionaire. That was the magic word. My pen flew across the page for a final few seconds, adding a last, desperate note about what if Chris Tarrant ran out of questions. Then, with a frantic flourish, I scribbled my last thought:

Must remember to check under the sofa for the headache pills.

I looked at the crumpled pages, covered in my looping, hurried handwriting. This was my brain, all spilled out onto paper, a messy, chaotic map of all my anxieties. Quickly, almost instinctively, I folded

the pieces of paper up, one after the other, making them as small as possible, trying to compress the worries into something manageable.

Then I grabbed an old envelope from my desk, the one that usually held my special limited-edition wrestling cards, and shoved all the worries inside. Out of sight, out of mind, right? That's what Mum always said, though it never quite worked for me. But I had to try.

With the envelope safely tucked away in the deepest part of my desk drawer (where no one, not even a professional worry-finder or a Y2K-proof alien, would ever look), I looked at the door. The chair was still wedged under the handle, my trusty anti-Dad-breaking-in defense, now rendered somewhat useless by the siren call of a game show. I yanked it away, a little clatter echoing in the small room.

And then, I rushed out of the room, almost tripping over my own feet. The lure of Who Wants To Be A Millionaire was strong, promising a brief respite, but the thought of escaping my little worry-box, even for an hour, was even stronger. Maybe, just maybe, I could forget about the headache pills, the Millennium Bug, and the general state of the world for a little while. Maybe.

Would you like to find out if Conner ever found the headache pills, or perhaps hear about another one of his 'catastrophes'?