

B I L L K O N I G S B E R G

THE MUSIC OF

WHAT

HAPPENS



ARTHUR A. LEVINE BOOKS

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CHAPTER TWO

JORDAN

JORDAN

When we get home Mom goes back out almost immediately, thank Goddess, and I head straight for my notebook.

I sit at my desk, push aside a lava lamp, and start writing whatever comes to me.

*Here's a boy who has failed
To take care of his mom
Like he was asked
He should double die
Once for the sin of failure
And
Once for the sin of lameness
Because I can't I can't I can't I can't do this
I can't I can't
I can't I can't I can't I can't do this
I can't I can't*

I shut my journal, amble over to my waterbed, flop down on my stomach, and as the waves undulate, I wonder what would happen if I stuffed my face into my pillow until I couldn't breathe anymore. Would I stop myself?

That makes me roll my eyes.

I don't want to die. I just. I don't want it to be my responsibility, I guess, whether or not we're going to be homeless.

In what world am I going to know enough about how to operate a grill to successfully run a food truck? In the summer, when it's a hundred and ten out every day? I was already dreading that when Mom talked me into it, but now it's totally on me and a virtual stranger my age? How's that gonna work?

What's a shelter like? Do we wind up in a shelter?

Should I learn to sell my body?

That one makes me laugh. Yeah, right. Like anyone's buying this.

I can't I can't I can't I can't do this.

I want my dad.

My dad. Yes. I really need to talk to him. Even if he can't answer.

I go into my mom's bedroom. Her sheets are tangled up like she's just been in a fight. A half-full Diet Pepsi rests on the bedside table, next to three Ring Dings wrappers, a bowl of grapes that appear to be well on their way to becoming raisins, and a bag of Sweetos, which are, apparently, the sweet version of Cheetos. Gross.

I momentarily sit down on her unmade bed, which is still warm from her body and still smells like her blueberries and shea butter bodywash.

Mom. What am I going to do with you? I close my eyes. Her room is like the room of someone who works super hard and can't afford a maid. My mom doesn't work anymore. She used to be a dental assistant, but after my dad died, she never went back to work. We've basically been living on my dad's insurance payout,

which wasn't like huge, but was enough to live on. Which is fine. She's fragile, and I get that.

The thing that upsets me is the histrionics. The *herstrionics*, as she called them, that one time when I said, "Enough with the histrionics" and she said that she didn't understand the gendering of that particular word. It's just that I never know when she's going to embarrass me by becoming Crazy Mom. And yeah, doing it in front of Max the Dude Bro from school was, as she said, not cute.

I love my mom. I love the Lydia Edwards who loves to do self-made scavenger hunts where, if we find everything in two hours, we get a treat. Who loves to wrestle on the floor with Dorcas, our goldendoodle. Who insists we start off every Christmas by walking the neighborhood in ugly pajamas, singing Christmas carols with all misheard lyrics. But the unhinged woman who sometimes forgets to shower, who is too delicate to run a food truck, who spends her days binge watching *Beast and the Beauties*, her favorite reality show, while reclined on our faded and torn leather couch, shouting obscenities at the contestants while free-basing Muddy Buddies? I love that mom too, but she scares me.

I promised my dad four years ago, right before he died, that I would take care of her. And I'm trying so hard. When Mom melts down, I do the best I can to cook meals and I let her cry on my shoulder and I do the shopping. And when she morphs into normal, awesome Mom again, I don't even mention the other stuff because I'm so glad she's back. But I guess doing all that isn't good enough.

Until two days ago, I had no idea we were running out of money. She pays the bills. Or I thought she did, anyway. Now I

know: We owe five thousand dollars in back mortgage. We have to pay it by July fifth or we lose our house. And Dad's insurance policy has dried up, I guess, so it's now on me until she finds a job, which she says she'll look for but no way will she find one and make that kind of money in a month.

I tap the bed, then punch it. The tap part is me sending love into the twisted sheets, hoping that she'll be okay. That we will. The punch is the part of me that knows it's hopeless. We soon won't have a place to live. Then I stand, walk over to her closet, and step inside.

The interior of the closet smells faintly of the fruity perfume Mom wears, even though I've told her a million times: no. I've told her I'd take her to the mall and get her something better. But she won't allow me to do it, so parts of our house, this closet included, smell a little like overripe melon. Nauseating.

Odor aside, what's great about the closet is that it's the one place where my dad still exists.

She refuses to throw out his cowboy boots. They are brown with a white, embroidered diamond design running up the leg. I sit down on the closet floor, pull his boots to me, and close my eyes.

The first year after he died, I used to come in here sometimes, turn on the light, close the door, and sit with them. Which sounds creepy, maybe, but it's what I have left of him and even though Dad was nothing like me, I loved him with every fiber of my being, and I know, deep down inside, that he loved me too, even if I'll never be manly like he was. His gravelly voice, gentle and strong, always made everything okay.

The leather feels smooth and warm as I rub it with my

fingertips, like it's just waiting to be worn. If only my feet were as big as my dad's, I'd wear them. Even though cowboy boots are in general horrifying and a major don't, I'd wear them proudly, because they're *his*.

I rub the leather and imagine he's here with me.

Dad, I think. What the hell am I supposed to do? Mom is falling apart, Dad. I don't know how to put her back together again, and I'm so sorry. I'm letting you down, because I should know how to do this and I don't, Dad, I don't.

Dad, I think. This kid Max, who we used to call Guy Smiley in AP Comp because he is one of those dude bros who is always smiling because life is perfect? He's gonna help, I guess. Because I know how much you loved that truck. And him helping is so random, and I don't even know how to talk to boys like him, and are you ashamed of me for that? That I'm not even a real, true boy?

And Dad, I think. What if we wind up on the street? Are you disappointed in me for not taking care of Mom as well as you would have?

I know it's just my imagination, but I swear I hear his voice respond. It floods through my veins, from inside of me right up to my inner ear.

No, Jordan. Of course absolutely not, never. His usually rough voice is soft, like marshmallow.

I sit this way for a long time, not moving. It's almost like I can't. Finally, I take a deep breath, kiss the leg of my dad's right boot, stand up and turn off the light.

I open the closet door and my mom is on her bed, reading. She glances up at me, and she doesn't seem the least bit surprised to see me emerge.

Her eyes are glassy and pink-tinged like she's been crying

again. She smiles weakly. “I need some snuggle time. Mini-snuggle?” she asks.

I melt. I can't help it. I always do. Because she's so fragile, like a bird, inside, like her supple largeness is inadequate to protect her brittleness, and it's my job to make sure she doesn't break. Because she's my mom, and she was married to Dad. Because I would still jump in front of a train for her, despite the fact that she sometimes makes me furious.

I sit down on the bed and she turns away and I settle into my outer spoon position.

I say, “Sure.”