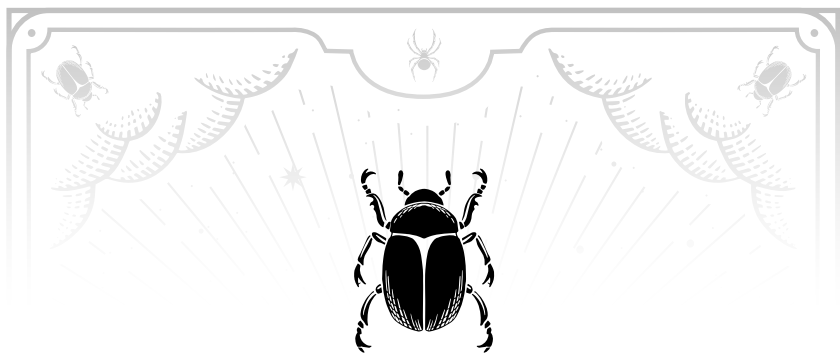




BUGS

JENNIFER LISS



Chapter 1

IN CHARGE

Asher Young helped his parents carry their luggage out to the car. Melody, his younger sister, was in the driveway, shooting hoops. His older brother, Clayton, was nowhere in sight, which was typical.

“Thanks, Ash,” his mom said. She gave him a tight hug. “We’ll be back Sunday night. Remember, Clayton is in charge. Please don’t fight with him. I need you to help him keep an eye on Melody.”

“I know,” Asher said. “You’ve only told me a hundred times.”

His mom sighed. “It’s our first time leaving all of you home alone for the weekend. I’m a little nervous. Can you blame me?”

Mr. Young looked at his watch. “Melody! Set that ball down for a second. Come give me a hug goodbye.” He looked at Asher. “Where’s Clayton?”

“He’s probably hard at work in his ‘lab.’” Asher made air quotes with his fingers.

Mrs. Young shot him an annoyed look. “Watch the sarcasm, Ash. Science may not be your thing. But Clayton loves it. Don’t tease him for just being who he is.”

Asher crossed his arms and leaned against the car. His brother’s mad-scientist behavior could get out of control. He’d lost count of the number of times his parents had made excuses for Clayton.

Their mom worried so much about Asher giving his brother a hard time. But she should be concerned about Clayton blowing up the house—or

worse. Who knew what he was actually doing in his lab-bedroom?

Finally, Clayton emerged from the house. He was adjusting his glasses with one hand. In the other, he was holding some sort of small machine. A panel was missing, and wires sprang out of it. Clayton waved it around. “Sorry. I was looking for my pliers.”

“You actually lost a tool in that perfectly clean and totally organized room of yours?” Asher asked, unable to control his sarcasm.

Clayton ignored him and looked at their parents. “You’re leaving now?”

Mr. Young tapped his watch. “Yep. We have to go. Keep your phone on and pick up when we call. Got it?”

Clayton was distracted. He kept staring at the broken device in his hands. Then he suddenly snapped to attention. “Got it! No problem! Have fun!”

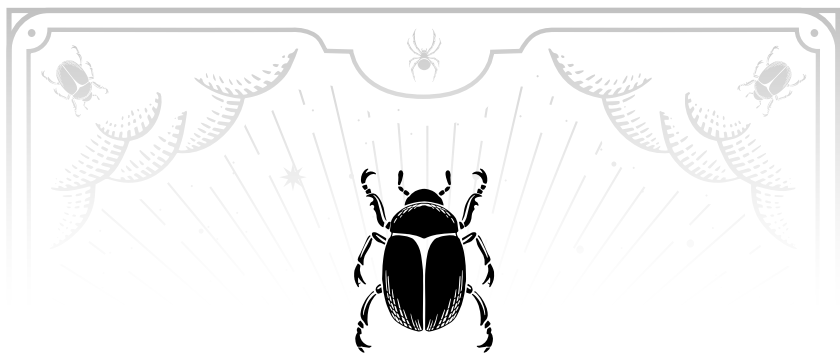
Melody snorted out a laugh. Asher rolled his eyes.

Their parents got into the car. Mr. and Mrs. Young waved as they pulled away.

Clayton was older, but he wasn't nearly as reliable as Asher. Why couldn't their parents see that? Asher truly didn't understand why they were leaving Clayton in charge. But that was their decision. Asher would happily play the part of a child. His older brother could deal with the responsibility.

As their parents drove away, Asher thought about his plan to prank Clayton. He almost giggled when he imagined how his older brother would react.

The plan was so good. Maybe he would even get Melody in on it.



Chapter 2

THE PRANK

Asher and Melody silently shot baskets in the driveway for a while. Like Clayton, Melody was basically into just one thing. But it wasn't science. Her passion was basketball. She could spend hours shooting free throws. But unlike Clayton, she was pretty easy to get along with.

Although Asher never said it aloud, he felt lucky to have Melody as a little sister. She kept herself entertained and was an impressive athlete for her age.

Unlike his siblings, Asher didn't have just one interest that consumed his free time. Mostly, he hung out with his best friend, Kip, and their other buddies. They watched movies, played video games, and read graphic novels.

Clayton disappeared into the house for a while. Then he returned with his backpack. "I still can't find my pliers," he said. "I'm going up to the hardware store. I'll be back in ten minutes."

Before Asher could respond, Clayton hopped on his bike. He headed off toward the shopping center nearby.

"Should we get a snack?" Melody asked.

Asher smirked. "I've got a better idea. I've been planning a prank on Clayton. Want to help?"

Melody's eyes twinkled. She wasn't a troublemaker. But she *was* eight years old. What third grader didn't enjoy a good prank?

Asher grabbed supplies from his room. Then he led Melody into Clayton's room. Their parents had tried to make Clayton keep it clean. Finally, they

had given up. Half-failed experiments cluttered the space. Piles of books lined the walls. Some stacks were as tall as Melody. Asher pushed heaps of laundry out of the way with his foot. After clearing a path, he made his way to his brother's desk.

Several weeks ago, a plastic frog had arrived in the mail for Clayton. Asher had watched his brother open the box. When Clayton realized Asher was watching, he'd snapped at him.

"Don't you ever touch this!" Clayton had said. Then he'd explained that the frog was a replica of a character in one of his favorite science-fiction novels.

Asher thought it looked like a simple plastic toy. The frog was brown and about the size of his hand. Truly, it would appeal to a toddler. This wasn't something that would normally interest a teenager.

Clayton had hurried into his room and put the frog in an old, waterless fish aquarium. That didn't make sense to Asher, but whatever. It was a classic Clayton move.

Now Melody watched with wide eyes as Asher took the plastic frog out of the aquarium.

Her face scrunched as she studied it. “That’s such a weird toy. What are you going to do with it?”

“Trade it for this.” Asher opened a cleaned-out yogurt container. He had punched holes in the lid. A real frog was inside. Asher had caught it at the park earlier that morning.

Melody started cracking up. “Good one, Asher. This will be so funny.”

Gently, Asher placed the real frog into the aquarium. Melody got a small dish of water and set that in there too.

Asher went into his room and tossed the plastic frog onto his bed. It bounced off and landed on the floor. Asher left it there.

Then he waited for Clayton to return home.

BUGS

Asher isn't happy when his parents go out of town and leave his older brother, Clayton, in charge. After all, Clayton is no fun. To liven things up, Asher and his little sister play a prank. When their joke goes horribly wrong, they soon realize they're not just in trouble . . . they're in danger!



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