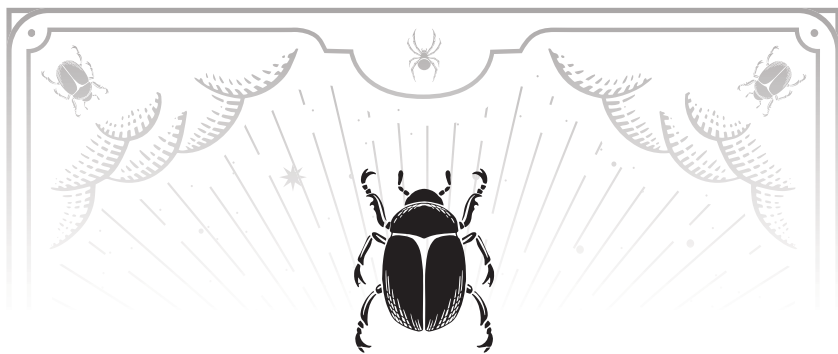




# BUGS

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!”

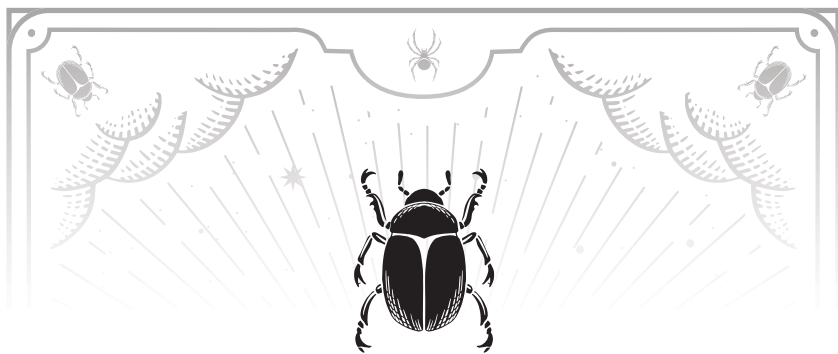
Melody snorted out a laugh. Asher rolled his eyes.

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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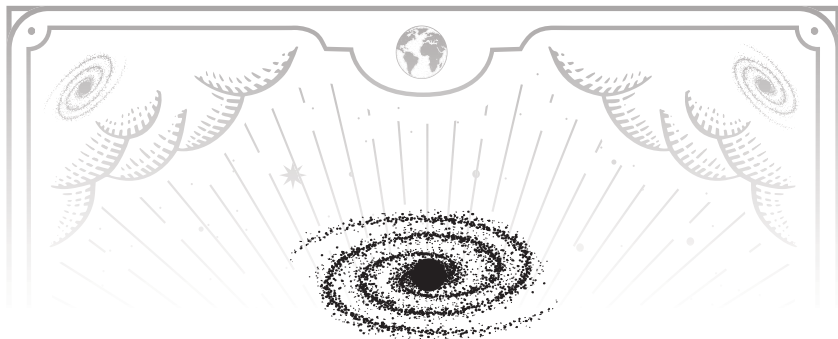
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# PEACE MISSION

JENNIFER LISS



## Chapter 1

# DREAM COME TRUE

I'll never forget the moment I found out about the Ramlix.

Mr. Ebert had just projected a map of Syria on the board. "Today, we're going to talk about how a peaceful uprising turned into a civil war," he said.

At that moment, my phone vibrated in my pocket. I tried to ignore it. When it happened again, I couldn't.

Mr. Ebert looked at me and raised an eyebrow.

“Silas West, is there something more important than my class?”

Then a buzz came from a girl’s purse on the desk next to me. Looking around the room, I saw my classmates touch pockets, backpacks, or whatever held their buzzing phones.

We weren’t supposed to look at our phones in class, so we stared at Mr. Ebert. Students weren’t sure what to do. The whole room was in a frenzy. Mr. Ebert’s eyes widened. I couldn’t tell if they showed alertness or concern.

“Something must be going on,” he muttered.

That seemed close enough to permission. At once, everyone scrambled to grab their phones. Before I could even read the notification on mine, the door flew open. A girl in the front row let out a little scream.

Coach Ebert ran into the room. She was Mr. Ebert’s wife and the coach of the school’s soccer team.

“Aliens,” Coach Ebert panted. “Aliens have landed!”

Mr. Ebert snorted. “Karen, what in the world are you talking about?”

Coach Ebert grabbed the remote control off Mr. Ebert’s desk. She turned on the television. Live footage showed a gigantic black disc hovering just above the ground. It looked like an oversized frisbee. I wondered if it was really a spaceship.

“It’s at the airport!” Coach Ebert said. “And there are more ships! They’re all over the world!”

The image on the news shifted to a world map with dozens of blinking red dots. We soon learned that each one of those lights represented an alien ship. They had landed at airports around the world, unannounced and undetected.

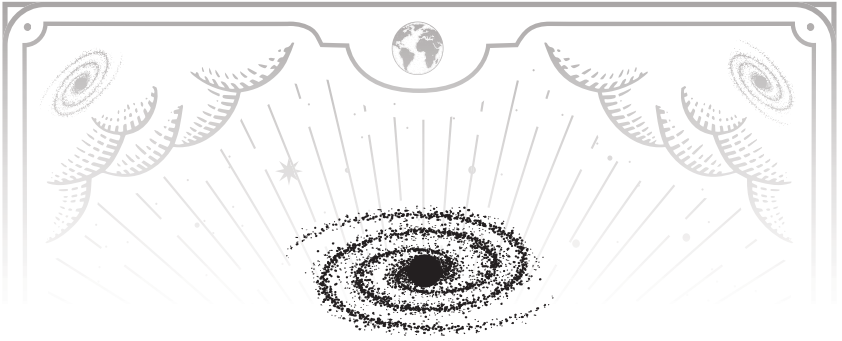
The next hour was a blur. Mrs. Park, our principal, made an announcement on the speaker system. She immediately dismissed school. We had prepared for emergencies, but not this kind. Many

people panicked. It was chaos. Students ran from their classrooms, pushing and elbowing each other. Parents began showing up to get their kids. They shouted frantically, driving the wrong way on the roads around school.

I was one of the few people who stayed calm. The screaming and running didn't affect me. I walked to my locker and grabbed my skateboard.

By the time I got outside, most of the kids and teachers had fled. Will Cobb was standing by the gate. That was where he waited for me every day after school. A huge grin was plastered on his face. "Can you believe this, Silas? It's absolutely amazing! A dream come true!"

I lightly punched his shoulder and started laughing. There was a reason Will and I were best friends.



## Chapter 2

# INFORMATION OVERLOAD

When the Ramlix first showed up, Will's dad had been deployed abroad for about four months. He had been deployed before, but it was going to be for much longer this time.

Will's mom wasn't in the picture. He had other relatives, but he wanted to stay with my mom and me. She loved Will like a son. I loved him like a brother, so it was a no-brainer. My mom became Will's official guardian while his dad was away.



Mr. Cobb's absence was hard on Will. Still, he really enjoyed living with us.

My mom always kept the kitchen stocked with our favorite foods. Best of all, Will and I had plenty of time to do what made us happiest. We watched alien movies, drew alien comics, and played alien video games. Aliens had been our obsession since the fifth grade. That was when we first met.

By the time we got to my apartment on the day the Ramlix arrived, my mom was already home from work. The television was blaring.

"Wipe those grins off your faces," she said when she saw us. "This is serious. Aliens! It's unbelievable! We don't know what they're doing here. The whole world has basically come to a stop."

But then she let a little smile slip. My mom knew that we were thrilled.

"They aren't making any trouble," Will said.

"Yet," my mom added. "They aren't making trouble *yet*."

I tried to offer reason. “In movies, aliens often show up as enemies. They come ready to attack. But most experts think that aliens wouldn’t do that. If they have made contact with us, it’s out of curiosity.”

“They’re peaceful,” Will added. “It’s like if we ever found aliens on another planet. We wouldn’t just start bombing them or do something crazy and violent.”

“We’ll see how this unfolds,” my mom said. “But until we know more, you boys aren’t going anywhere.”

“Where would we go?” I asked. “All we want to do is stay glued to our screens anyway.”

“Yeah,” Will said. “We have to learn absolutely everything.”

That was what we did for the next several hours. So much news came in. Will and I devoured it. My mom was on the phone the whole time. She talked to friends and relatives all over the country. Everyone was freaking out.

Will was able to get in touch with his dad. Mr. Cobb basically repeated what my mom had said. He agreed that we should stay put until the world had a better sense of what was going on.

Will and I set up our laptops in the living room. We also kept the television on and constantly monitored our phones. There were six screens to keep us completely informed. We weren't going to miss anything.

# PEACE MISSION

Best friends Silas and Will are obsessed with aliens. When a group of them, called Ramlix, suddenly land on Earth, the boys jump at the chance to join their mission. Soon Silas starts to wonder if everything is as it seems. Why are the Ramlix here? Do they really come in peace?



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