

Chapter One

Date: March 23, 2005 **Time:** 7:42 p.m. CST
To: MRobbins@mned.comp
From: Elockhardt@wryword.comp
Subject: *HELP! To my gorgeous eighth-grade teacher! From her adoring student, Emily Lockhardt*

Dear, dear, Mrs. Robbins...I can't do my spring report on bugs! I can't! I've tried, and I can't! I hate bugs. Truly. Yesterday, my brother (who was unbelievably excited that I'd have to do a paper on insects) brought me a book he'd just received. Anyway, the book's called "Bugs: Up Close and Real Personal." What are the odds? (*Pretty great, if it's about torturing me.*)

It has the most realistic photographs of those hideous things that I have ever seen—including a picture of this gigantic millipede on the cover. I gave it back and told him I wouldn't be needing it after all, because I was sure you were going to answer my plea and let me switch my topic. Anyway, when I went downstairs to answer the phone—it was just Angelina, bragging about her new shoes again—that must have been when Bud (that's my brother—you had him two years ago...remember?) stuck that horrible bug book of his under my pillows (I always sleep with three).

Mrs. Robbins, last night I had the most horrible nightmare about those millipedes! They were living in my pillow—thousands of them. My head was smack dab in the middle of their squirming multi-legged bodies, as they slithered over my forehead, up my nose, inside my ears, boring through—trying to reach my brain! Some of them even forced their way under my eyelids. The pain was unbearable! I'll never forget the feeling of all those legs over my face and their feet (?) scratching my corneas. When Mom came in and woke me up, I was gagging on something and honestly, Mrs. Robbins, it felt like a millipede. I know you'll say that's impossible, but I swear, when I tried to cough it up, I...I felt it scurry down my throat. I told Mom and she laughed and said Stephen King should watch his back. She thinks the "millipede" was just mucus. But Mrs. Robbins, since when does mucus skitter?

This morning I checked my pillows for holes and stuff, (that's how real my dream was), and when I lifted them up, that gargantuan millipede on the cover of Bud's bug book was staring RIGHT at me. And I swear, it was grinning. I ran out of my room, through the kitchen (right past Bud, who was inhaling his waffles) and threw his horrible bug book down the cellar stairs. Needless to say, I'm not speaking to him ever again—for a very long time.

Mrs. Robbins—please! Don't make me do my report on bugs! Please! Look what they've already put me through! They are the ugliest, lowliest creatures on this earth, and I hate them. They're creepy and crawly, sluggy and slimy. Some scamper under your bed, while others are busy munching on your skin while you're in bed, watching the spider on the ceiling dangle overhead. Still other varieties slither beneath a pile of dirty, damp clothes.

Quit Bugging Me

And did you know that they grow inside your favorite cereal? They can even sometimes be found wriggling in the flour that mom's making chocolate cake with. There are even bugs that live on your HEAD. Lice. I know of their ways first hand—they called my long blonde hair home just last winter. UGH! My mom sat huddled above me with a magnifying glass and flashlight for HOURS—ripping their eggs off of my scalp, endlessly pursuing the long, black live ones. It was like a scene straight out of the jungle. Not to mention the scratching. My family walked around continuously for two weeks with our hands on our heads.

And you want me to do my report on bugs? Mrs. Robbins...do you dislike me that much? Am I so des...um, pickable?

Hey, I just got an idea! Why not have Lyle Lahrvey do it? He LOVES bugs! Loves them! Why, just last week he boasted that he had tried to revive a squashed beetle by performing chest compressions. Oh, please, tell me Lyle and I can switch assignments. He'll do my report on bugs and I'll do his report on the prairie. Why, if I'd been alive a century ago, Laura Ingalls Wilder and I would have been best friends—for sure. That Nellie would have been running for the hills.

Oh, please, please, PLEASE let us switch. Please! You're my favorite teacher, you know. Truly. I've never told you before because I didn't want that to influence my grades. Not that you would EVER let that happen. Oh please, e-mail me back soon with your reply. Mom says I can stay up until midnight tonight, if necessary. She says you might be on a "date" with Mr. Robbins—dancing or something. Well, I guess that's sort of possible—I mean you do look so young!!! Mom'll let me wait up because SHE knows how important this is to me. Please remember and never forget...you're my

Kaplan Lahrve

favorite teacher, you're gorgeous, oh-so-youthful looking and remarkably stunning, and I HATE BUGS!!!!!! Most Sincerely, Emily Lockhardt

.....

Date: March 23, 2005 **Time:** 10:01 CST
From: MRobbins@mned.comp
From: Elockhardt@wryword.comp
Subject: *Re: HELP! To my gorgeous eighth-grade teacher! From her adoring student, Emily Lockhardt*

Dear Emily, my sycophant student, such a literate and vibrant imagination you have! I do not dislike—nor have I ever disliked—you. You are certainly not “despicable,” by any means. I was very pleased to hear from you. I am glad you are utilizing your computer and my e-mail address. Knowledge is a powerful tool and it shall take you far. Oh, yes, I do remember your brother, Bud. Very well, in fact. The poor dear...tell me, has his face cleared up?

Now, down to the nitty gritty. You made a powerful case, concerning your abhorrence for bugs, and I must admit I was compelled to check my flour and my son, Leonard's, Kaptain Munch Cereal for tiny “critters” as soon as I'd finished your message. Quite honestly, the content of your e-mail made my skin crawl.

Isn't that wonderful? That's exactly the sort of passion and punch your upcoming report needs. I am sure it will be a real winner.

In spite of (or perhaps because of) your well-versed plea, I have decided that you shall do the report on bugs, and Lyle Lahrvey will report on the prairie. Why? Because you both

Quit Bugging Me

can chart new territory, cover new ground—and learn something new!

Lyle has agreed to keep an open mind concerning his report, and I must also remind you that one does not need to be a fan of “Little House on the Prairie” books to pen a report about the aforementioned ecosystem.

Now, Emily dear, please don’t let this dishearten you. This is for your own good...trust me. Please always remember—especially when you feel “bugged down,” (so to speak), that “thankflea,” (ha) your academic year under my supervision will soon bee; (a little bit of bug humor!) but a memory. Have an enjoyable weekend, and I’ll see you bright and early Monday!

Sincerely,

Your (once?) favorite teacher, Mrs. Robbins

.....

Date: March 24, 2005 **Time:** 4:56 p.m. CST.

To: JoelJin@surftwn.comp

From: Elockhardt@wryword.comp

Subject: *I hate bugs and Mrs. Robbins!*

Oh Joel. I am about to collapse with disgust! That evil, ancient, decrepit-looking Mrs. Robbins is making me do that icky report on bugs after all. How much does one 13-year-old lady have to bear?

She expects me to actually research things like slugs (UGH!) and earwigs, for crying out loud. Why, if I have to do that I’ll puke. (Speaking of puking, Mom’s calling me to dinner. Meatloaf’s on the menu—not the nummy kind she used to make though. No ketchup, no grease, no taste. Now she only uses ground turkey instead of hamburger. Gross.)

You know, I can tell she doesn't like me... (Mrs. Robbins, not my mom). She's probably jealous of my youth and lack of wrinkles—what do you think?

I've got this wrinkly old, old, OLD teacher on my case and then Bud puts a disgusting bug book under my pillow and all of the sudden I'm going crazy. How can that be? It's like they're in cahoots with each other. The old bat teacher and my too skinny brother. He is such a dork. A too dopey, too messy, too dirty dishwater blonde-headed, too zit-faced (well, there's a couple of them left at least) dork! I try so hard not to let him bother me but he does. He bothers me more than anybody in this world. Now that I think of it, brother is really bother without the "r." Who ever invented that word had it right, alright. This kid who half the time forgets to put deodorant under BOTH arms, is making ME lose my sanity! That's just ridiculous. If you were here I could get through all this buggy mess, Joel.

Joel, I am so confused and I miss you!!! I wish you hadn't deserted me and gone to California. Minnesota just isn't the same without you. I miss your tallness. It made me look even more petite than I already am. I miss your jet-black crew cut and your goofy smile. I miss you being HERE up north where you're supposed to be.

I bet your teacher is real young and laid back and tan and stuff. I bet she says, Hey dudes, shall we read on the beach today? And I'll bet you all say yeah, man that'd be cool...I bet you slouch now and have let your hair grow out like your zillions of surfer friends. Don't be cool, Joel. Be you!

Why aren't you HERE when I NEED you?

Hey! Maybe I'll run away and stay with you and your family! Wouldn't that be great? The two "EmJo's" together

Quit Bugging Me

again. Oh, if my life could just be the WAY IT USED TO BE.

Joel, something's happening to me—and it's not good. It's bad. I have to tell you about this dream (?) I had last night. I was literally drowning in millipedes—really! All those millions of legs...it was positively horrifying, but the worst part was...it felt sooooo reeaalll!!! I'm scared.

Uh-oh. Mom's doin' that screechy thing with her voice, yelling that dinner will be ruined. (How could we ever tell?) She can't find Bud. He's probably off in the woods again. Mom says one day those woods might just swallow him up. Really, I don't know what he does out there. If you think about it, a 150-acre nature preserve is an easy place to get lost in. But he always seems to find his way back out, darn it. Anyway, I'd better sign off for now.

But, Joel, honestly, I feel real edgy like the worse is yet to come and I can't shake it. The truth is, I'm not sure it was just a dream...I think it might have really happened...

Em

.....

Date: March 24, 2005 **Time:** 6:04 p.m. CST.

To: Elockhardt@wryword.comp

From: JoelJin@surftwn.comp

Subject: *Re: I hate bugs and Mrs. Robbins!*

Hey Em:

What might have really happened? Drowning in millipedes? What the heck are you talking about Em? You gotta e-mail me back! You can't leave me hanging! Speaking of hanging, some of the kids in the neighborhood have asked

me if I wanna go hang 10 with them next week. That means surf. I think.

As for the bug report, Em, it won't take you long to come up with a decent paper—remember you're not only gorgeous—you're brilliant. (I'm quoting from the Christmas card you sent me this year.) Relax! Try and keep it loose, Em. Boy, are you dramatic. You act dramatic and you sure write dramatic. You're the only person I know who actually spell checks their emails.

You know darn well you'll see the entire Jenkins family on April 1st—that's only a week or so away. You'll be happy to know that my hair is still spiked and my legs are still way too long for my body. I tripped over nothing just walking into English yesterday right in front of Melanie Dorn. Man, Melanie Dorn. No cool hanging 10 dude here.

It'll be sweet to get back to Minnesota for a few days over spring break. Ma misses your mom, Pop wants to check out your Dad's new table saw (weird but what's new), and as for Janice (aka Queen of Mean)? Well, she asked if she could stay behind in California alone. Su-weet as su-weet can be! Unfortunately my folks won't let her. Obviously, she hasn't changed much since you last saw her...

Anyway, Em, just go ahead and do the bug report—I promise, it'll be over before ya know it.

Say...did ya save me a big hunk of cold turkey meatloaf? Num num. Ya know it really does sound pretty good. Since coming out here Mom's been making SUPER healthy cruddy stuff like tofu burgers. I don't know what tofu is, but it isn't good and it sure is not meat. Get back to me soon.

Joel

.....

Quit Bugging Me

Date: March 25, 2005 **Time:** 10:00 a.m. CST.
To: JoelJin@surftwn.comp
From: Elockhardt@wryword.comp
Subject: *Nightmare that's real!*

I'm sorry I couldn't get back to you sooner, but Dad put his foot down and made us all play cards together last night. It's hard to believe that it was the best part of the evening Joel, but it was. Because what happened afterwards...I can't tell anyone but you. No one else would believe me. Joel, I almost died last night and it's all because of Bud's horrible bug book...