



Chapter 7: The wiggly worm

Jinkin finished sweeping the last aisle and the sunflower seeds Scraggs had dropped on the floor. Finally, Jewel and Rock watched Jinkin slide the remaining sunflower seeds off of Jewel's books into his hand. They held their breath, waiting for Jinkin to notice the books, backpack and writing gear.

Just as they thought they were safe, Jinkin seemed to hesitate. He stared right down at the cover of the books and then briefly glanced up in their direction. Rock and Jewel froze—they were certain Jinkin was looking right at them. Scraggs let out another "Cawww."

Jinkin reached up to scratch Scraggs on the back of his head and sighed, "OK, buddy. I understand. Time to go." He turned, walked out the door, closed it behind him and started pushing his supply cart down to the next room. In the distance, Rock and Jewel heard Scraggs caw again and the two of them heaved a sigh of relief.

"Oh my gosh," whispered Jewel, leaning back against the closet wall. "I thought for sure we were toast! I mean I could have sworn he was looking right at us!"

"I know! Me too! That's so weird. I totally thought he recognized our books and then he looked this way. But, I mean, he just left."

"I know. Maybe that bird distracted him."

"Maybe. But you know what's weird about that bird?" Rock said. "It seemed to be focusing on Charlie but it didn't eat him. The bird just screeched."

"Yeah, but I think that's because Janitor Jinkin told him to 'Move already.' One thing's for sure, if Jinkin barked at me like that, you'd see my feathers flying fast too." Jewel quipped.

"Do you think it's safe to go look for Charlie? Can you believe he spoke to us?!!! A talking ant! Speaking

of weird things, how unbelievable is that?"

Jewel stood up. "So cool! Wasn't it?! Do you think there is any possibility that he survived??"

Rock stood up too. "I don't know."

Rock and Jewel's gaze met. They both dreaded to think about what might have happened.

"Let's go look anyway," Rock said optimistically. "You never know, right?"

"Sure," said Jewel, although she didn't hold out much hope. For the first time she looked around the closet they were in and noticed how dirty it was. On the back wall it looked as if someone had made a hole and then patched it over with a piece of wood. "Let's get out of here."

The two of them tiptoed out and then got down on their hands and knees being careful to look everywhere on the ground before they moved ahead.

Rock started to quietly call out, "Charlie. Hey buddy... are you okay? Charlie..."

Jewel did the same. "Charlie... it's okay, you can come out now... the bird's gone and it's just us."

They inched their way forward down the aisle. To their dismay, it looked spotless.

"Charlie, oh Charlie, where are you?..."

Charlie heard the voices in the distance but it took him a few seconds to realize that they were calling for him. He was still too busy recovering from his four times over near-death experiences: the fall, Rock's shoe, the bird and the broom pretty much had sent him into a zombie-like state.

But the sound of Jewel's voice cut through the fog in his head and he suddenly realized that although hanging upside down and bruised, he was relatively okay. He tried to call out to Jewel and Rock but found that his mouth was too dry to speak. He sounded like he had the worst case of exvoicious (the ant equivalent of laryngitis) ever. Nothing came out but a little squeak that not even an ant standing, or hanging, next to him would notice. He decided he'd better trek back down the cabinet wall and make an appearance.

Rock and Jewel continued to search but they neither saw nor heard any sign of their ant. They were about to give up.

“I don’t see him anywhere. I’m sure that broom must have gotten him.” Jewel said.

“Yeah. I guess so. What furly luck, it’s just the worst.”

Jewel took her hands off the ground and sat back on her heels. “Hey, Rock. Is that why you wanted to come back here so badly? Did you have any idea that ant could talk?”

Rock stopped searching for a moment and leaned back on his heels as well. “Yeah. I suspected something but I thought you would think I was crazy if I just came out and said, ‘Hey Jewel. I collected a talking ant today.’”

Jewel chuckled. “You’re right... Do you think any of the other insects in your jar talk?”

“I don’t think so, but no harm in checking I guess.”

The two of them stood up and Rock went to grab the stepladder Janitor Jinkin had moved to sweep the floor.

In the meantime, Charlie came jogging out from under the cabinet ledge. He saw Jewel’s Techflight orange sneakers standing in front of him. He glanced up just in time to see the leg of the stepladder aiming straight for his forehead. He tried to scream but nothing came out. He army rolled to the right (as Jessop had taught him) just in time to save himself from sure destruction.

He could not believe he almost lost his life again – now the fifth time in less than an hour.

But before he had time to recover, he noticed Jewel’s sneaker rising up above him. He scrambled to figure out which way to dodge for cover. In the following three seconds, he had to maneuver out of danger from the four feet heading up the stepladder. He just could not believe his incredibly bad luck... every second another life threatening challenge was thrown his way.

Rock and Jewel, however, now had all feet up on the stepladder and were reaching to take Rock’s jar back off the shelf. This managed to clear the bewilderment and self-pity from Charlie’s head as he realized that the fate of his new bug friends depended on him. He made his way back under the cabinet and started

the long climb up towards everyone.

Jewel and Rock placed the jar on the cabinet top in front of them and peered intensely into it.

Gunther and XL froze. They had absolutely no idea what to do, how to act or even what to think. They had watched all the events from the jar, having no ability to understand Rock and Jewel, the two of them did not know why the boy and girl were staring at them now. Were they about to be tortured? Did they expect some kind of show? Were they going to be separated? Where was Charlie when they needed him?

Gunther was so terrified he passed wind.

The smell was so brutal that XL nearly passed out.

To Rock and Jewel, their insects merely appeared frozen and neither of them appeared to be speaking.

“Hello little guys. Can you speak too?” Jewel asked.

Neither Gunther nor XL moved.

Jewel flicked her finger against the glass a couple of times. “Gosh. I think we’ll be lucky if these guys move, let alone speak. They look like statues.”

“They were moving before but I really do think it is just the ant who talks.”

They stared a couple of moments longer. Nothing. No movement, no sound.

Unbeknownst to any of them, Charlie was just past half way up the cabinet. He had a cramp in his side and the bottom of his feet were beginning to hurt from gripping so tightly to the cabinet, but he was determined to get there before Rock and Jewel gave up trying to talk to Gunther and XL.

“What a bummer.” Rock lamented. “I had the only talking ant alive and now I’ve got a paralyzed worm and caterpillar. Come on, Jules. Let’s go, we’d better get home.”

“Sorry Rock—that’s a rotten deal. But, at least we didn’t get caught and now you know you weren’t going crazy since I heard him too.”

“I guess so. It sure would have been nice to have talked with him a little longer. I mean a talking ant Jules! Can you imagine?!”

“I know. Come on, let’s go. The more we think about it the worse it will seem.”

Jewel picked up the jar in both her hands to put it back up on the shelf. Rock started to move off the stepladder.

Just then Charlie came peeling up over the side onto the countertop. He wanted to scream but he couldn’t even manage a squeak now. Jewel was too busy putting the jar on the shelf to notice him and Rock had his head down.

Charlie had a bad feeling he was going to miss them completely. Out of sheer desperation, he started jumping up and down because he had no idea what else to do.

It didn’t attract any attention from Rock or Jewel.

Jewel, however, was just tilting the jar forward to place it back up on the shelf. The force of it sent a frozen XL sliding smack into the glass wall of the jar.

From this unfortunate position XL had the fortunate event of seeing movement on the counter below him. It looked like a Mexican jumping bean. He shook his head in disbelief. Was it? Could it be? It was! Charlie!

XL glanced over at Jewel. She was too intent on putting him back to see Charlie. She had let go of the jar and was about to climb back down.

“Charlie! It’s Charlie! He’s there! Over there behind you!” he shouted, as if Jewel could hear him. He reared up on his hind section and started shaking his body from side to side. He looked ridiculous.

Jewel put her hands on the counter top and started her way back down the steps. Rock was already down, holding the wobbly stepladder steady for Jewel. Her two feet landed on the ground without either one of them noticing the jumping ant or the shaking worm.

Both Charlie and XL were dismayed. The sight of Jewel and Rock getting ready to leave without noticing him was overwhelming. His body slumped down on the counter. He now couldn’t move or speak.

If worms had any body hair, XL would have pulled all of his out by now. He was frantic. He somehow sensed that everybody's well-being was dependent on him alone in this moment. He took a deep breath and backed up as far as he could.

XL stared as hard as he could at the glass jar wall in front of him. *This isn't going to be pretty, he thought, But it's the best chance we've got.*

With that, he missile-launched his entire body against the jar wall.

It was ugly, but it was effective. As XL's body hit the Jar, it made a sickening thud inside the jar and a small thud outside the jar. It was just loud enough to make Rock glance up at the jar.

"Eww. Take a look at that Jules." Rock pointed up at the jar which now had a stunned XL sliding down the glass wall, his underbelly pressed up against the side resembling the bottom side of a slug.

Jewel looked up. "Yuck, that is gross. I wonder what happened. A moment ago that dude was frozen like a popsicle."

XL slowly started to regain consciousness. His entire body ached. He opened his eyes in time to see Rock and Jewel looking at him. With every last ounce of strength in him, he super sprung back onto his lower quarters and started flailing his body from side to side again while yelling at the top of his worm lungs.

This utterly terrified Gunther. He was now completely convinced that XL had lost any marbles he might have had in his worm head.

However, it served its purpose for Rock and Jewel: it got their attention.

"What is he doing?!"

"I have no idea. He looks like he's having some sort of fit."

Hearing this, Charlie regained awareness of what was happening around him. Without moving his body, he raised his eyes up to look at the jar. The sight stunned him: there was XL shaking himself as if he were insane and with his mouth wide open yelling something.

XL was getting so dizzy from shaking that he was about to keel over. His brains felt like scrambled eggs. He paused momentarily to see if Jewel and Rock had found Charlie yet. They were still looking oddly at him. Without any hesitation, XL started hitting his head repeatedly on the jar, pointing his blows in the direction of Charlie.

“He’s...” Thud. “Right...” Thud. “Over...” Thud. “There.” Thud.

“I think he’s lost it,” said Jewel.

“Or maybe...” Rock had the spark of an idea. “Maybe he’s trying to tell us something.”

And that’s when, Rock saw it. The black speck on the counter. “Charlie!!!” he shouted.

Jewel turned and saw him too. “Oh my gosh! There he is! Charlie! Charlie?! Is that you?”

Charlie could only raise his front leg off the counter. His mind was screaming “YES! It’s me, Charlie!” but his mouth, like his body, would not move.

Jewel rushed over to Charlie. “Charlie! Charlie! Say something!”

There was no answer, just the flicker of a leg.

“Maybe it’s not him,” Rock said as he leaned over to look at the nearly lifeless ant.

“No. No. It has got to be him, I am sure of it,” said Jewel. She put her cheek down on the counter so that she could look closely at the ant.

“Well, how do you know? I mean, he’s not saying anything and he looks just like every other ant I’ve ever seen.”

“I just know,” she paused a few seconds. “I think he may be hurt. What do you do for an injured ant?”

“Beats me. Maybe cover him with a leaf?... Blow on him?... Give him some water?...”

At this last suggestion, Charlie lifted his leg again and shook it. Jewel still watching him closely, saw him move.

“That’s it! I think he needs water! Quick get some from the sink!”

Rock ran over to the sink, pulled down a paper cup and filled it with water. He handed it to Jewel who carefully put her fingers in and let a drop fall on the counter in front of Charlie. The edge of the drop spread out just enough to touch Charlie’s lips. The water tasted like nothing he had ever had before: it was better than the chocolate cake. It was heaven running over his throat.

Jewel and Rock watched Charlie anxiously. “Say something, please. Say anything,” whispered Rock.

Charlie opened his eyes to see his friends standing over him. A smile spread across his face. Still in a happy daze from his healing drink of water, Charlie opened his mouth and sighed, “I love you Jewel.”

Discussion Questions: Take time to read through all the questions first to find out which ones you feel will be right for you and your family. Not all will be suitable for all families since these questions were made to appeal to many different ages. And, of course, they are simply suggestions. Feel free to ask any questions that come to your mind and don't forget to get CURIOUS about the answers your children give! Ask questions related to their answers if you can.

1. Jewel and Rock had to quickly hide in the closet of the science room. Where is the best hiding place in your house. (Maybe go there and see how long it takes for your parent to find you!)
2. Jewel was worried that Jinkin had seen them so she said, "I thought for sure we were toast!" What does being "toast" mean? Can you think of another saying that would convey the same thing?
3. If an ant, or any other bug/insect/animal started talking to you, what would you do? Who is the first person you would tell?
4. Have you ever had laryngitis? (or exvoicious?) What was that experience like? Have you ever purposefully stopped speaking for a day? If so, what was it like? What did you learn? If not, why do you think someone might choose to do that?
5. After not being able to find Charlie and thinking that the broom might have gotten him, Rock says, "Yeah. I guess so. What furly luck, it's just the worst." What do you think the word "furly" means? Make up a definition and use it in your own sentence.
6. Jewel was wearing a pair of "Techflight" sneakers. Why do you think the company named them that? What special qualities do you think the sneakers may have? If you have the time, draw what you think her sneakers look like.
7. Gunther got so scared that he "passed wind." Did that gross you out or make you laugh? Would your family laugh or become mad if you told a fart joke at the dinner table? How about if you told one in the car? Is there a difference?
8. Charlie gets a cramp climbing up the cabinet. Have you ever experienced a cramp? Where in your body was it? Can you describe the feeling?
9. What is a Mexican jumping bean?