



Chapter 9: Bluecraft warnings

The coast looked clear and the hall was silent. “Looks good,” Rock whispered to Jewel. “Let’s head to the front entrance and if anyone sees us we’ll just say we forgot our books in Professor Pether’s room, okay?”

Jewel nodded “yes” and the two of them made their way down the corridor. At the end of the hall, Rock stopped and peered around the corner. The main entranceway was also where several corridors converged into a general gathering place—a dangerous exiting space for Rock and Jewel. There were too many places a teacher could be coming from without Rock and Jewel being able to see them in time.

No one was in the general meeting area.

Rock turned and nodded his head toward the door, signaling to Jewel to follow him. They crept around the corner and then burst into a run for the doors. They made it about half way when suddenly they heard a voice shout, “Hey you two! Stop right there!”

They’d been caught. Jewel’s stomach did a forward somersault. More detention time with Ms. Jitherburrs flashed through her mind.

The two of them stopped and slowly turned around to see a heavy-set man who had food stains all over his clothes.

“Just wait one minute lads. What are you doin’ in the school after hours?”

It was Sloppy Joe, the man who served them hot foods in the cafeteria. He usually wore headphones while he worked and scooped out food to the rhythm of his music. The line in the cafeteria for food varied according to Sloppy Joe’s music selection for the day—faster songs made for a quicker line.

“Uh...” Rock stammered. “We, uh, forgot our books.”

Sloppy Joe eyed them suspiciously. "You *both* forget yer books?"

"Uh huh," Jewel and Rock nodded in the affirmative.

"And just where would that have been?" Sloppy Joe crossed his arms across his chest.

"On Professor Pether's desk," Jewel squeaked out.

"So you both left yer books on Professor Pether's desk and you just decided to go back and git them without asking anyone?" Sloppy Joe did not sound like he believed them.

"Well, yeah, I mean no," Rock stuttered.

"Yes? No? Now which one is it mates? Can't make up yer minds?"

Rock's mind was racing. Jewel was much too shocked for words. They were sure that Sloppy Joe knew they were lying. Both of them said nothing.

"I thought so," Sloppy Joe broke into the silence. "I'm going to have to report you both."

"But we..." Rock began.

Just then the door to the auditorium creaked open and Janitor Jinkin stepped out with Scraggs on his shoulder. He stared at the three figures before him. "What's going on here?" he grumbled, annoyed that people were still in the building when he had so much work to do.

"I just found these two creeping through the school. Said they left their books in Professor Pether's room but I think they might be up to something," Sloppy Joe informed the janitor.

Janitor Jinkin didn't look at Jewel or Rock. He just spoke directly to Sloppy Joe. "They did."

"They did what?" Sloppy Joe replied, a bit annoyed that the janitor had said anything about the situation.

"They left their books in Professor Pether's room."

Sloppy Joe didn't know what to make of this. He was sure he had caught Rock and Jewel up to something.

He turned to Rock and Jewel. "But you didn't ask anyone to get them for you, did ya's? You's just headed on down there yerselves so you's could do whatever ya wanted while ya got them, didn't ya's?" Sloppy Joe asked.

Rock's mouth was open, but before he could speak Scraggs let out an ear-piercing caw and Janitor Jinkin spoke instead. "Aye, I told them they could get their books. Didn't need more stuff cluttering up my rooms."

Sloppy Joe, Rock, Jewel and Charlie (peaking out from the jacket fold) were shocked. "You gave them permission?" Sloppy Joe said taken back.

"Told them to get their books and get out, which I would appreciate if you would all do. I've got too much work to be making small talk with you." And with that Janitor Jinkin made his way down the hall. He hadn't so much as looked at Jewel or Rock. Neither of them had any idea of why the janitor had just covered for them. How could he even have known that they hadn't asked anyone permission?

Sloppy Joe turned back to Rock and Jewel. "Well, I guess then you guys should be going. Let's go." He ushered them towards the door. Rock and Jewel stayed quiet. They didn't want to mess up a good thing.

Outside Sloppy Joe looked at them, "Next time speak up if you's want to stay out of trouble. No use taken you's to the Principal's office if you'd just told me that Jinkin's had given you's permission." And with that, Sloppy Joe slipped his headphones back on and walked away.

Rock and Jewel both let out a huge sigh of relief.

"That was close," Rock said still staring at Sloppy Joe half-walking, half-dancing across the parking lot.

"That was weird," Jewel replied. "I mean, what just happened? Why did Janitor Jinkin say that for us?"

"I have no idea," Rock said looking at Jewel. "But boy am I glad that he did. I thought we were toast."

"Me too—except that you always get out of trouble. Only you would get lucky enough for Jinkin to actually cover for us."

It was true. Rock had this uncanny ability to get out of trouble.

“Well,” Rock stammered. “You got out of trouble too.”

Jewel rolled her eyes. “Rock, we all know that if I had been on my own Jinkin would have come running full speed around the corner and shouted about how I had had littered or something. It’s only because of you that we got out without triple detention.”

“Actually,” chimed in Charlie. “I think somehow Scraggs was the one who got you out of detention. When he cawed he called that guy, a ‘stingy wart hog.’ I got the impression that the two of them don’t particularly like him.”

“They don’t like Sloppy Joe?” Jewel questioned.

“No, and I don’t either,” Charlie said pensively.

“Why not?” asked Rock. “I think he’s kind of funny, with his music and all, and to be fair, the guy was only doing his job.”

“You didn’t smell it then?”

“Smell what?” Jewel and Rock said together.

“He smelled just like pickles.”

Jewel and Rock stared at each other.

“And he had some white stuff on his sneakers. I couldn’t make out just what it was because the pickle smell was too strong, but it looked a lot like sugar to me.”

“He would have access to all the food supplies too since he helps Mildred out with the cooking. But I wonder what someone could want with pickle juice and sugar?” Rock thought out loud.

“Sounds like something Ms. Jitherburrs would have us make,” Jewel joked. “Maybe she’s in on the whole thing—whatever the whole thing is.”

"I still wish we could have seen what was on Professor Fahid's blackboards. I hope it's still there in the morning." Rock sighed. He paused for a moment thinking. "Oh, well, we are just lucky to be going home without detention – and with Charlie. Come on, let's go."

Jewel and Rock walked over to their bikes. "This is your bike?!" Charlie exclaimed out loud as Rock and Jewel bent down to undo the locks around their wheels. The sight of their bikes was like an alien aircraft sighting for Charlie. He could barely take it all in at once – the chains, the wheels, the seat, the brakes – it was all so complex and exciting. The stories his Uncle Jaxx had told him raced through his mind. This was going to be so cool.

"Yep, this is it," Rock replied wrapping the lock around the center bar of his bike. "Are you ready Charlie?"

"You got it!" Charlie piped back. He was filled with joyous anticipation.

Rock and Jewel climbed their bikes and headed home – about a five minute ride from school. They lived across the street from each other.

Charlie could not believe his luck. The bike ride was everything his Uncle had said it would be and more. It was like the greatest carnival ride he could have ever imagined. It was even better than bungee leaf jumping – all of the thrill but none of the danger (or so he thought). What a day! Yahoo! What an adventure!

Out of the school parking lot, Jewel and Rock discussed the day's oddities.

"Hey Charlie, can you tell us anything more about the person that came in and took Talolah's ladybug?" Jewel asked.

Charlie thought a moment, "Um, no, just that whoever it was he, or she, I really couldn't tell, didn't need the step ladder to get the jar down."

"Well Sloppy Joe certainly is tall enough. I wonder what he's up to..." Rock trailed off.

"Wait a minute, I think we should be careful. It might not be Sloppy Joe—" Jewel warned.

"But what about the pickle juice smell and the white powdery stuff I saw on his shoes?" Charlie argued.

"All right, but Sloppy Joe might not be working alone. You never know how many people could be involved – there's lots of stuff that's been happening. He could be working with like, um, Ms. Jitherburrs! Now, there's one person I'm sure would be involved in anything weird and she's tall too!" Jewel exclaimed.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! Just because you can't stand Mrs. Jitherburrs, doesn't mean she's behind this whole thing. We've got no evidence against her, although you're right she's tall, and a bit odd – I'll give you that. But so is Lundiva Pommegray, the new political science teacher," Rock threw in.

"Yeah what a nutter she is! Can't they find anyone to teach that class who isn't certifiable? I mean the guy who taught it before her used to arrive in a straight jacket."

"Professor Schmidtenhaur? Genuine squirrel feed, that's for sure What ever happened to him?" Rock asked.

"Started eating flies in class, so they had to fire him."

"Are you serious?" Rock asked.

"Nah."

"Oh."

"How about Coach Cranium? He's tall," Jewel offered.

"I don't think so, he's so nice," Rock tried to protect one of his favorite teachers. "How about Principal Geriatrik?"

Jewel made a sympathetic face. "I don't know, Principal Geriatrik may be a little behind the times but he really does seem to love his job. I can't imagine he'd do something to disrupt the school or jeopardize his position."

"Yeah you're right and he's really not all that tall... anymore." Principal Geriatrik was now 73 years old, the oldest head of school in the district.

Jewel decided to change the subject.

“I can’t believe we almost got busted by Sloppy Joe,” Jewel said.

“Me too. We were so lucky that the meat man didn’t bust us.”

“You mean the ‘sandwich stacker’?”

“No. The ‘meal maker master’.”

“The ‘master mash man’.”

“The ‘goop getter’.”

Jewel and Rock played this game all the time. It was a signature part of their friendship. If there was a new substitute teacher or someone they spotted on their way home from school, they would always try to find a fitting nickname. You had to be quick, no hesitating. The person who stumbled lost and the last name spoken would be the winner. When Ms. Jitherburrs had substituted for the first time Jewel had won with “Ms. JitterBUGLY.” It had made Rock laugh, and there was no laughing in “name that person.” You had to keep a straight face.

Jewel was just about to reply with “the musical pickler,” when they made a right turn onto Merlyn Way and ran into Spencer Bluecraft. Literally. It was Rock’s bike that clipped Spencer’s foot and sent all three of them—Spencer, Rock and Charlie—flying off into the grass. This, of course, was highly traumatic for Spencer. Not because he was in the least bit hurt, besides a surface scratch on his heel, but because he had actually made contact with a tire and all the unmentionable germs that inhabit a grass lawn. He started to hyperventilate.

Jewel jumped off her bike to help him. Spencer scurried back on his hands and feet to avoid being contaminated by Jewel as well. He was in a full on panic. Jewel put her hands in the air to show him that she wasn’t going to touch him. “It’s okay, it’s okay. I won’t touch you. Are you alright?”

Spencer nodded his head up and down but he was still hyperventilating.

“Can I do anything?” Jewel asked.

Spencer shook his head a terrified “No” as he clutched his backpack and fumbled to get the zipper open. He pulled out a paper bag (that had been stored inside a protective plastic bag) and placed it over his mouth to breath.

In the meantime, Jewel turned to Rock and asked if he was okay.

“Yeah,” he said brushing the grass and dirt off of his jeans. “I’m fine. Are you alright Charlie?” He glanced up onto his shoulder, but Charlie was gone.

In the middle of his euphoric first ride, Charlie had been catapulted off Rock’s shoulder and about four feet through the air before landing in the grass.

When he got up, he heard Rock calling his name. Charlie ran to the top of his blade of grass and stood on his rear legs to get the best view. Rock was facing away from him, looking down, and Jewel was to his left also searching the ground. Another boy was sitting on the grass with a terrified look on his face. They were all about four feet away from him.

Charlie called out to them but in the wide-open space his voice hardly carried. Rock and Jewel made no indication that they had heard him at all.

Rock called out for Charlie. “Charlie! Charlie where are you? Are you okay?” He scanned the grass but no sight of him.

Spencer looked on in complete horror. He lowered the bag from his mouth. “To whom are you speaking ?” he asked carefully.

“Me? Oh, uh...” Rock quickly looked up at Jewel. How was he supposed to tell Spencer, of all people, that they were looking for a talking ant?

“Was I speaking to someone?” Rock scratched his head and look puzzled.

“Of course you were speaking to someone. You just called out the name ‘Charlie’ several times. Who’s Charlie?”

“My...” Rock hesitated.

“Uncle!” Jewel filled in. “We were just talking about him before you fell, remember? You must of hit your head or something and thought that you were talking to him, right?”

Rock starting rubbing his head instead of scratching it. “Yeah, I did bump my head pretty hard. That must have been what caused my confusion and why I was calling for him.”

Spencer rose to his feet shaking his head. “First Nurse Weatherbottom and now you. I think something must be in the water at school. It’s a good thing I don’t drink it.” He tried brushing off his pants and then realized that his hands were just being further contaminated. He reached into his bag for some instant hand sanitizer. He carried an industrial size bottle with him at all times.

“What do you mean ‘First Nurse Weatherbottom’?” Jewel asked.

Spencer rubbed his hands thoroughly with the cleansing gel, “Oh she’s loony too. She was talking to herself today in the hall, mumbling something about all the castor oil being gone and that there must be a ghost in the school.”

“You’re joking, right?” asked Jewel.

Spencer looked at her annoyed. “Do I ever joke?” He glared at her with one eyebrow raised behind his thick glasses. The answer was no, Spencer Bluecraft did not possess a sense of humor, merely a keen sense for the all potential germs in any given environment.

Spencer paused a moment and looked at his pants. “I’ve got to go home and change my clothes. You guys need to watch where you’re going.”

“Sorry Spencer. I guess I got caught up in talking about my Uncle Charlie,” Rock shot a sideways glance at Jewel.

“Well if I come down with hepatitis I’ll know to whom I should send the bills,” said Spencer. From anyone else this would have been a joke, but, as noted by Spencer himself, Spencer never joked around. “See you later.”

Jewel and Rock watched as Spencer walked off. When he was out of listening distance, they started calling quietly for Charlie.

“Charlie! Where are you?” They whispered but heard nothing in return. Charlie just could not project his voice far enough for his friends to hear.

After calling several times and getting no response, Jewel turned back to Rock. “Do you think there could actually be a ghost at school?”

Rock paused a moment from his search. “I don’t know. I didn’t much believe in ghosts before today but I didn’t believe in talking ants much either.”

“Want to find out?” Jewel looked at Rock with a twinkle in her eye.

“What do you mean?” said Rock, now curious.

“If there really is a ghost at Fiercedale, then probably the best time to look for him is at night when no one’s around. And things are getting so strange that I don’t think we should risk not seeing what was on Professor Fahid’s blackboards. If we wait until tomorrow morning it might be gone. I think we need to go tonight.”

“Sneak into school? Tonight?” asked Rock in disbelief.

“Uh-huh.”

Rock stared at Jewel. His friend was so cool! He couldn’t think of a better idea.

“I say...” Rock started but before he could finish Jewel interrupted him.

“Shhhh!!!!” Jewel shushed. “I think I heard Charlie,” she said.

The two of them stood motionless waiting to see if Jewel was right. Charlie had been screaming the whole time but it was a mild, westerly breeze that finally provided enough power for Charlie’s voice to reach Rock and Jewel. Seeing the two of them go still, Charlie mustered up all of his strength and yelled once again. “I’m over here!!!!” he waved his arms wildly over his head.

Rock and Jewel caught the sound and instinctively dropped to their knees to start their search in the direction of the noise. Now lower to the ground, Jewel and Rock were able to pick up the trail of Charlie’s

voice and, after about two minutes, they finally located him.

“Boy, am I glad to see you guys! What happened?” Charlie asked.

“Spencer Bluecraft happened,” joked Rock. “When we turned the corner, we ran right into him. Are you okay, pal?”

Rock reached down and let Charlie crawl back up his arm. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Well, we’ll go a little slower from now on and once we’re home I’ll get you anything you need to feel better and rest up for tonight. “

“What do you mean ‘rest up for tonight?’” Charlie looked at the two of them suspiciously. He had been looking forward to a nice, long sleep tonight.

Rock smiled at Jewel. “We’re going to break into Fiercedale tonight to go looking for some ghosts.”

Charlie didn’t smile back.

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. Charlie, Rock and Jewel tried to sneak out of the school without anyone seeing them. Have you ever tried to sneak into or out of a place without someone knowing? Did you find it fun or was it more scary?
2. Janitor Jinkin lied about giving Rock and Jewel permission to get their books. Why do you think he did that? Do you think it was okay that he did that? Why or why not? Have you ever lied to help someone get out of trouble? When might lying be okay? Is it ever?
3. Jewel and Rock ride their bikes to school. When you go to school physically, how do you get there? By bus? Car? Bike? Train? Walk? Hang glide? Do you go on your own or with someone else?
4. Jewel and Rock live across the street from each other. Do you know who lives across the street from you or in your building? What are they like? Have you ever baked them cookies? Why or why not?
#RandomActOfKindness
5. Charlie has been bungee leaf-jumping. Would you ever go bungee jumping? If you have been can you describe both what you were thinking and feeling?
6. Rock loves Coach Cranium. Do you have a coach in your life? If so, what do you like about him/her? Is there something you don't like? What makes a good coach?
7. What do you think of Rock and Jewel's nicknaming game? Do you want to play it with someone?
#CTANickNameGame Do you have a nickname?
8. What does it mean to hyperventilate? If you don't know, find out.
9. Spencer is really afraid of germs. Are you? What are some good habits for limiting the spread of germs? On a scale from 1-10 (10 being perfect) how good are you at performing those habits? Be honest.